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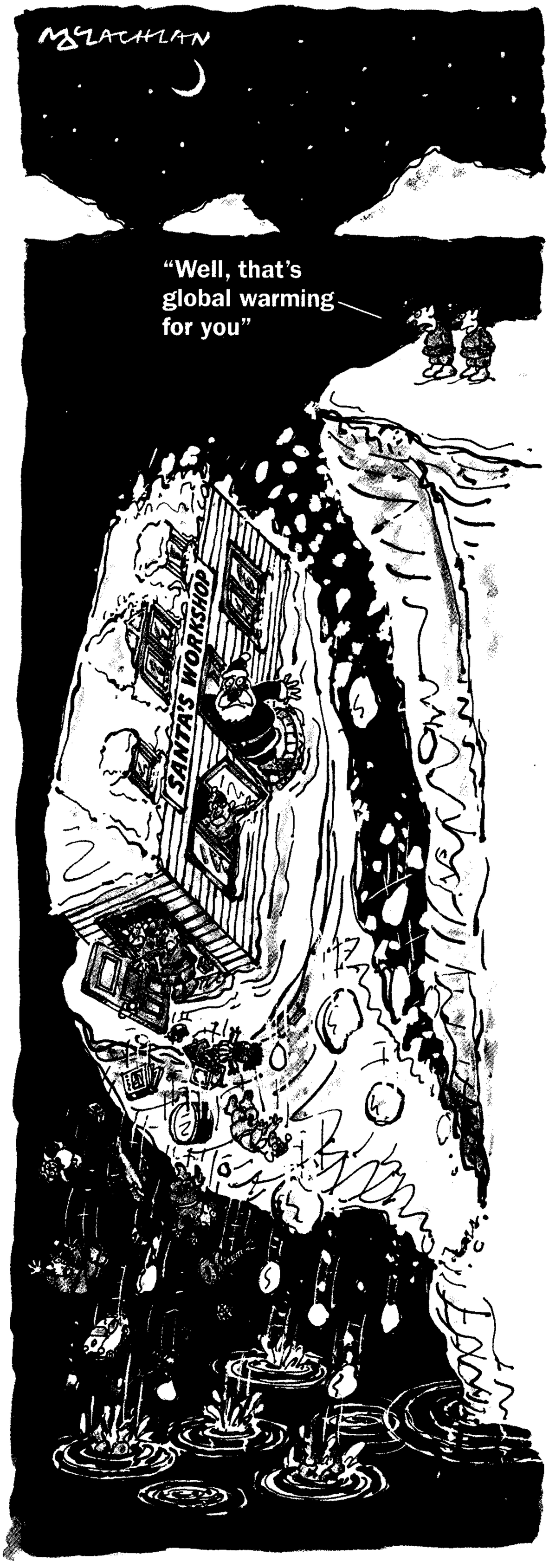

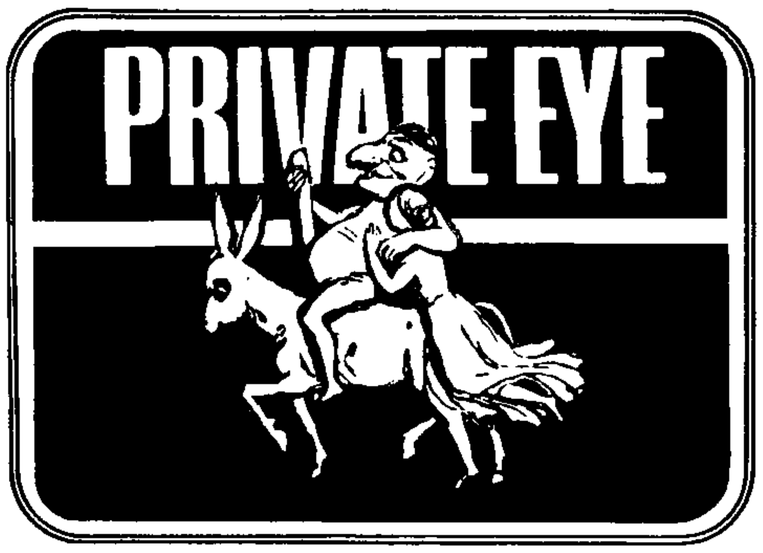

Season's bleatings

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THE chancellor's pre-budget report announcements provided more jobs for the boys. And first up was his old friend and major Labour donor *Sir Ronald Cohen*, who was asked to lead a review of what to do with the billions of unclaimed assets lurking in Britain's banks.

Cohen is an interesting choice to lead a commission committed to good works, having made his pile as chairman of Apax, Britain's foremost private equity outfit. The firm makes its money by managing funds often based in secretive tax havens of the sort that enable the tax dodging that Brown once again roundly condemned.

One tax avoidance loophole the chancellor was happy to leave open, however, was the one that allows UK residents who declare themselves "domiciled" elsewhere to avoid tax on assets stashed overseas. The tax break is especially welcome among millionaires who, like Sir Ronald, can claim allegiance to another country. Cohen was born in Egypt, perfectly qualifying him for non-domiciled status, but his office wouldn't confirm whether he benefits, declaring his tax status "a private matter".

Also brought into the fold was **Rod Aldridge**, executive chairman of Capita, the firm behind fiascos including the Criminal Records Bureau, Individual Learning Accounts and umpteen local authority cock-ups. For his commitment to the cause – he once said "My feelings are much more towards a New Labour agenda than anything else, although I'm not a party donor" – the Crapita boss will lead a government team looking at youth volunteering. The work is backed by the taxpayer to the tune of £100m, and by some "founding partners" who put in, er, £3.5m between them. The companies keen to cash in on the yoof market are T-Mobile, ITV, MTV, Tesco, Sky and tax dodgers extraordinaire, KPMG.

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ABC

LIB DEM Shadow Chancellor Vincent Cable was none too happy about Gordon Brown's £2bn-a-year tax rise on North Sea oil and gas producers.

From the hundreds of points he could have raised at the first Treasury parliamentary questions session since the pre-budget report, Cable chose to ask whether the extra tax would be reversed if oil prices fell, and commented afterwards that Brown's proposals were "a grab for cash" – echoing criticisms from oil industry group, the UK Offshore Operators Association.

Cable was quiet, however, on his special interest in the issue. Until becoming an MP in 1997 he was chief economist at... Shell.

MORE moaning about the tax rise came from Sir Roy Gardner, chief executive of British Gas owner, Centrica.

Sir Roy fired off a letter to the *FT* explaining that the rise would add to costs already inflated by the anti-competitive behaviour of "monopoly suppliers" on the continent. And he knows all about anti-competitive behaviour.

In 2003 his firm was fined £200,000 by regulator Ofgem for preventing customers switching to rival suppliers. Then last year, as chairman of Manchester United before the Glazers came in, Gardner was at the helm as the club cashed in on the replica shirt price-fixing scandal, for which it was fined £1.8m by the Office of Fair Trading.

Sir Roy is now pencilled in to take over as chairman of Compass, the catering company whose businesses include school meals provider Scolarest (of Turkey Twizzler fame). Great.

JUNIOR Tory environment spokesman Gregory Barker, rewarded for campaigning on behalf of new leader David Cameron, will need to do some fast-talking to convince the world of his "green" credentials.

For two years, not long before entering Parliament in 2001, the MP for Bexhill worked in Russia for Roman Abramovich's Sibneft oil group.

QUESTION TIME FOR PIERS MORON

1 FORMER City Slickers James Hipwell and Anil Bhoyrul, along with day-trader Terry Shepherd, now face a possible jail sentence for misleading readers and investors about the value of shares. As previous Eyes have noted, it emerged during their trial that Daily Mirror editor Piers "Morgan" Moron bought three tranches of Viglen stock worth £67,000 on 17 January 2000, the day before Hipwell and Bhoyrul tipped the computer firm in Moron's paper. But in the five years since the scandal broke, the size of his investment has invariably been given as £20,000. Who was responsible for this misleading figure – was the Mirror covering up for Moron or simply repeating what he had told them?

2 MORON has always insisted that his purchase of the shares on 17 January 2000 was simply an incredible coincidence, as he didn't know the Slickers were tipping Viglen until he read the next day's first edition at 11.30 that night. Yet on the afternoon of 17 January he sent Anil Bhoyrul an email about some shares he'd sold a few hours earlier, on Bhoyrul's recommendation, which had since gone up. "I sold them this morning for bloody Viglen," Moron wrote. "Congratulations halfwit." Can anyone other than a halfwit believe that despite discussing Viglen with the Slickers that very day he had no idea they were writing a story about it?

3 A WEEK earlier, on 10 January, Moron emailed Bhoyrul: "I need some ideas for my general PEP, which is bursting with profit from NXT [another share tipped by the Slickers]. Got any good longer term suggestions for this year?" A mere seven days later, while filling his boots with £20,000-worth of Viglen shares, he bought a further £35,000 of the shares through his PEP, plus another £12,000 through his wife's PEP. Another incredible coincidence, or what?

4 MORON told his broker on 17 January that he wanted to "pile in" to Viglen shares, explaining that he'd had a "kosher" tip-off via a "rather convoluted route". When the broker asked if he'd heard it from "the big white chief", Moron replied: "Indirectly, yeah." This was assumed by the lawyers from Lovells, who conducted Trinity Mirror's investigation, to be Viglen boss Sir Alan Sugar – which would explain the reference to an indirect route, since the Slickers' story was prompted by a lunch they had on 14 January with Viglen chief executive and PR man Nick Hewer. Moron, however, said that he was actually referring to… his uncle, who thought Viglen "a good bet". Why didn't Lovells ask the broker if he was in the habit of calling Moron's uncle "the big white chief"? And did they ever actually speak to the uncle?

5 "THERE seems to be a feeling among some of my broadsheet chums," Moron told the Today programme last Tuesday, "that the new evidence that came to light was something that had not been available to either Trinity Mirror or the DTI. All I can say is they knew absolutely everything within about five microseconds." Graham Livingston of Lovells, who conducted the TM inquiry that exonerated Moron, told the court he was not aware of a conversation between Moron and Nick Hewer, the Viglen PR man. Had he known of it, he added, his report wouldn't have cleared Moron. The conversation concerned the timing of a critical phone call on the day when the Viglen story was written and shares were being bought by the editor and others. Hewer testified that he had been asked to lie about the timing of the call to make it look less incriminating: Moron told him it would be "helpful if the time [of the call] could be pushed back from the time it was actually made". Since Hewer was a witness who didn't appear to have any motive for giving false evidence – as perhaps the Slickers might have done – how does Moron explain away his damning testimony?

6 "THE exact number of shares I bought in Viglen was known to Trinity Mirror within a few hours of the Telegraph story first appearing back in February 2000," Moron claimed last week. If so, it would also have been known to the Press Complaints Commission, whose report on the affair thanked Trinity Mirror for its cooperation and claimed to have seen the findings of the TM/Lovells inquiry. Yet the PCC ruling, which was published in full by the Mirror under Moron's editorship, stated that he had bought only £20,000 of Viglen shares. Why didn't the PCC know the truth about this central fact? Surely Moron isn't going to claim that he didn't read the PCC ruling (as he argued about the Slickers' original Viglen story) before it appeared in the paper?

7 "I HAVE no problem for the last five years endlessly reading about me being the Nick Leeson of Fleet Street," Moron said last week. "I only have a complaint [at the suggestion] that I somehow held stuff back from the investigating authorities or from my company. I didn't. They knew everything." This again is at odds with the evidence given by Livingston. And what about the Press Complaints Commission, which was clearly misled? Does Moron not regard them as "investigating authorities"?

8 WHEN the Mirror said that Morgan had donated all the profits he had made on the Viglen share transactions to charity, was it referring only to profits on the £20,000 he had declared? And what about the profits on the shares he bought on his wife's account?

9 MARTIN Cruddace, the Mirror lawyer responsible for checking the City Slickers' column, bought shares in three separate companies just before they were tipped by the Slickers – and persuaded his girlfriend, his mother and his girlfriend's father to invest as well. He told the court this was all a "coincidence". Since that is also what Morgan claims about his £67,000 investment in Viglen, should we conclude that Mirror staff have psychic powers which put Mystic Meg to shame?

10 IT emerged during the trial that the Mirror's news editor David Leigh, senior reporter Ian Miller, and financial reporter Clinton Manning also bought shares in Viglen the day before they were recommended in the Slickers' column. Were they too gifted with the amazing paranormal talent that so many Mirror hacks possess?

11 HIPWELL told the court that after Mirror senior management called in Lovells to conduct their inquiry, he was approached by Cruddace and Moron's deputy, Tina Weaver, who had herself dealt in shares recommended by the Slickers. "They came over to my desk and said I needed to help Piers Morgan because he was in trouble and that I should generally frustrate the Lovells investigation. I needed to make it clear to Lovells that Piers had not seen the Viglen story before it went into the newspaper." Weaver, now editor of the Sunday Mirror, was cleared by the Press Complaints Commission of breaching its code of ethics. Does the PCC still believe it was right to acquit her?

12 WHERE does this leave the reputation of Lovells, the top City law firm which gave a clean bill of health to everyone at the Mirror, bar Hipwell and Bhoyrul, and praised Moron for being "commendably frank"?

13 AND what of the reputation of City grandee Sir Victor Blank, chairman of Trinity Mirror, who backed Moron unswervingly from the moment the scandal broke – and indeed actually promoted him to the post of editor-in-chief of the Mirror and the Sunday Mirror in April 2001, even though he was at the centre of a DTI inquiry at the time? "We had an internal investigation that showed us what the Slickers had done. Piers Morgan had not done that," he told the Sunday Times in June 2001. "If you buy shares today, and they are then tipped in the Sunday Times in 10 days and you didn't know they were going to be tipped, you may be embarrassed and you may make some money but it isn't a terrible thing. I think that with Piers it was coincidence. You have to stick with your judgement and you have to resist the pressure. I think that I've done the right thing." If Blank believed that, is there anything he won't believe?

14 IF nothing illegal had taken place, why was Moron's stockbroker Anthony Laiker asked to leave Kyte Securities shortly after news of the controversy broke?

15 IT was revealed during the trial that lawyers for the day-trader Terry Shepherd (the Slickers' co-defendant) had twice asked Piers Moron to appear as a witness, but he refused. Yet Moron claimed last week: "I was not called as a witness for the prosecution or defence – much as I would like to have done, because a lot of rubbish was being said about me from the stand by various people." Oh yeah?

16 "I WAS investigated by the DTI," Moron told the Sunday Times on 11 December. "They were satisfied I had done nothing wrong." In fact, the DTI decided only that it didn't have enough evidence to prosecute him ("on the evidence currently available"), which is a somewhat different verdict. Will Moron now desist from his misleading claim that the DTI cleared him of any wrongdoing?

17 AFTER the Press Complaints Commission had rebuked Moron for his conduct, in 2001 it issued new guidelines for journalists involved in the handling and publication of sensitive financial information. As an adjunct, it warned hacks to bear in mind the "Private Eye test": "Under this principle, the standard to be applied is whether it would be embarrassing for the activities of the journalist to be published in the satirical Private Eye magazine." Readers of the Eye can judge for themselves: who if anyone involved in the City Slickers affair has passed this test?

Street of Shame

FEVERISH coverage of the Peter Falconio murder trial from the *Daily Mail*. But there was one moment when the *Mail*'s eager court reporter must have dozed off – when trial judge Brian Martin spoke disapprovingly of the publishing tidal wave that the case was about to unleash, with five books already in the pipeline.

Martin singled out one of these, *Bloodstain* by Richard Shears, saying he could "only wonder" how a book which was due to be published the moment the trial was over could possibly represent an accurate and detailed investigation. This observation failed to appear in the otherwise exhaustive coverage provided by the *Mail*'s correspondent Down Under, one Richard Shears.

Anyone reading the *Mail* over the past few years will have gathered that Shears thinks Joanne Lees must have lied about what happened to Peter Falconio. His belief is founded mainly on the fact that it would have been impossible for Lees to escape her bonds (although she managed to untie herself in the witness box, exactly as she described in her police statements), the supposed unreliability of DNA evidence and, crucially, that although she spoke to TV's Martin Bashir, she refused to sell her story to the newspapers or help hacks who had book deals – an obvious sign of guilt.

Despite her non-cooperation, Shears triumphantly finished his 86,000-word tome just hours after the verdict, and it was rushed into print immediately. Alas! Because the typescript had been going to the printers every week, chapter by chapter, the emphasis all the way through is on Murdoch's obvious innocence and Lees's unreliability – until the final chapter, when the jury's failure to deliver the right verdict leaves poor Shears floundering. .

Were Joanne Lees to accept a handsome cheque from the *Daily Mail*, of course, the emphasis could yet change in the book's second edition…

FOLLOWING the guilty verdict in the City Slickers' trial, the *Sindie*'s business editor Jason Nissé penned a self-righteous column railing against City hacks who write about companies in which they have an interest.

"I personally own no shares and can't see any way that I could," he boasted. "There is a code of practice that says journalists should not seek financial gain from what they write about in the paper."

Can this be the same Jason Nissé who is a paid non-executive director of Nirex, the nuclear waste quango, and who two weeks earlier wrote in the *Sindie* about Nirex's proposals to build a giant nuclear repository?

It is indeed. But that's not the same thing *at all*. As he explained in a brief tailpiece to his regular column three months ago, after joining the Nirex board: "Before accepting this post, both I and the editors and managers have considered whether this might cause a conflict of interest. However, as I have long held the view that a repository for nuclear waste needs to be built and have said so in these pages, we felt the risk was minimal."

JUST FANCY THAT!

"The Berliner *Guardian*'s success story continues." – *Guardian*, 10 December.

"*Guardian* losing more sales after Berliner relaunch." – *Daily Telegraph*, 10 December.

IN ADDITION to the *Mirror*, which ran not one word about the City Slickers trial, two other national newspapers were conspicuous for their lack of coverage.

The *Sunday Express* printed nothing about it, while, in seven weeks of court proceedings, its sister title the *Express* devoted just 130 words in two articles to noting that the pair were standing trial and then that they had been guilty. What possible explanation could there be for this discretion?

Surely it has nothing to do with the fact that, after he had been sacked by the *Mirror*, Anil Bhoyrul was hired by Express Newspapers to perform the role of personal rottweiler to proprietor Richard Desmond. Under the byline of Frank Bailey, Bhoyrul faithfully devoted himself to attacking the *Express* rivals at Associated Newspapers and, when he got bored out of that, prepared PR puffs, masquerading as news stories, that hailed the magnificence of the Desmond empire.

DESPITE a seasonal display of good cheer by the two at the staff Christmas party, the animosity between the *Observer*'s News editor Kamal Ahmed and executive editor John Mulholland has finally broken into violence.

With nerves fraught as the day for the *Observer*'s berliner relaunch looms, and both Ahmed and Mulholland ruthlessly competing to take over when editor Roger Alton eventually leaves the stage, the pair came to blows over an argument about deadlines and had to be pulled apart by Alton.

It would have been hard, however, for Alton to lecture them about their conduct. Only a few years ago, he was himself involved in a bout of fisticuffs with a member of his design team!

"A FEW weeks ago, I saw Roger Alton, editor of the *Observer*, standing on a traffic island in Clerkenwell Road, carrying a supermarket bag and trying, unsuccessfully, to hail a taxi. He looked miserable and distracted and, in the pouring rain, I thought for a moment he was a tramp." Thus began Peter Wilby in his *Evening Standard* media column last week.

Colleagues of the former *New Statesman* editor have been surprised by this unusual display of animosity, not least because Alton was one of the first editors to commission Wilby when he was moved on from the magazine; and also because the best impression of a tramp in the Street of Shame was generally thought to be the one performed by Wilby at the *Staggers* when lurching back to his desk and falling into a deep sleep after lunch at his favourite local restaurant.

THE *Observer*'s star sports columnist, Clare Balding, recently filed a 1,000-word piece on the attractions of the forthcoming Winter Olympics in February.

This positive and unexpected bit of PR will have delighted the BBC, which is broadcasting the event that has been something of a ratings flop in the past. Heading the Beeb's coverage in Turin is likely to be a certain C. Balding, a fact neither she nor the *Obs* chose to mention.

FESTIVE cheer was in short supply too at the *News of the Screws*' Christmas bash.

One health-conscious hack decided to spurn the free food on offer and bring an orange to the party instead – a decision which did not go down well with the rag's tired and emotional deputy news editor, Dave Rigby.

"What the *fuck* is that?" he demanded, before booting it out of the journalist's hand.

Sadly for Rigby, the fruit splatted into the ceiling, whereupon it dripped all over editor Andy Coulson's head. Luckily *Screws* hacks can always turn to the paper's "Helping Hand" Campaign against bullying if they're not happy with the way they're treated.

JUST FANCY THAT!

"I don't give a toss if people think I'm gay. I wouldn't say I've not thought about it, because you do. People do when they're growing up. And I did once kiss a man in a club, but that was like – you know, your lipstick lesbians that are not really lesbians – I just walked in and there was a friend of mine there at the time and he came up and kissed me. I thought, sod it, I'll kiss you then. But in a manly way. I might try it. If I was attracted to a man, then I'd do it, but as it stands I haven't been physically or emotionally attracted to a man to do anything sexual with them… Being asked if you're gay is only a difficult question if you deem being gay as something wrong, dirty, or derogatory. It's not to me."

– *Robbie Williams*, Somebody Someday, *co-written with Mark McCrum, published September 2001.*

"Robbie Williams won substantial libel damages yesterday when lawyers for Mirror Group Newspapers and Northern & Shell accepted that claims over the pop star's sexuality were false. The *People* newspaper and the magazines *Star* and *Hot Stars* had carried stories last August and September saying Williams was secretly gay and had had a string of casual sexual encounters with men. In the high court, lawyers for MGN and Northern & Shell agreed to make a formal apology. The singer's counsel, Tom Shields QC, told Mr Justice Eady: 'Mr Williams is not, and has never been, homosexual.'"

– Guardian, *December 7 2005*

"MILLIONS of words were written to mark the 25th anniversary of John Lennon's death last week," thundered the *Daily Mail* on 13 December. "But none told the most surprising story of all… LENNON AND HIS GAY AFFAIR."

There are two possible reasons for this. One, that the rumours of a tryst between Lennon and Beatles manager Brian Epstein which began during a holiday in Barcelona in 1963 so lovingly detailed for the *Mail* by Michael Thornton have been dismissed as fantasy by almost everyone who knew either man; and two, that the tale is so ancient and well-known it was even dramatised as a feature film, *The Hours and Times*, as long ago as… 1991.

GREAT to hear Boyd Hilton from celebrity magazine *Heat* on the *Today* programme last week, extolling the virtues of *Little Britain*.

Despite his continued support in the pages of his magazine (Hilton and David Walliams are good friends), *Little Britain*'s third series has been haemorrhaging ratings, suggesting this horse may have bolted. But Hilton was having none of it, going so far as to suggest that *Little Britain* was "the comedy phenomenon of our time – it will be critic proof".

What he didn't mention was that he is currently working on the official *Little Britain* book. It's due out next year, and so it is in Hilton's interest to prolong *Little Britain*'s stay on the cultural radar. Good of Radio 4 to help out.

APOCALYPSE NOW

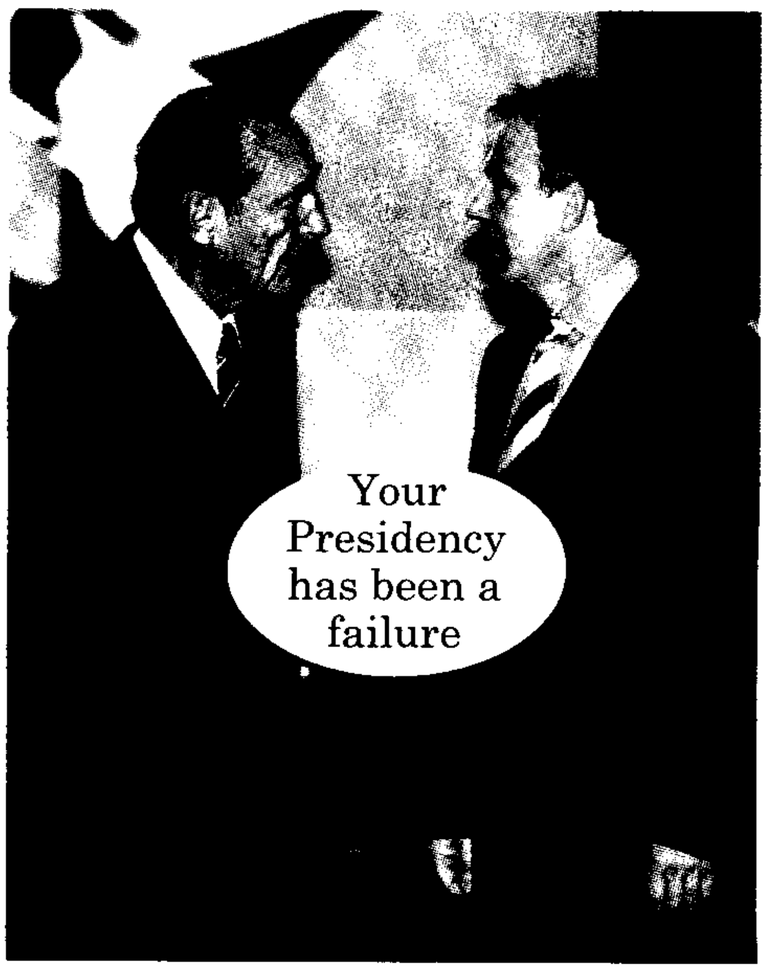
THE series of explosions at the Buncefield oil terminal may have caused the biggest fire in peacetime Europe – but even this was not enough for some hyperbolic hacks.

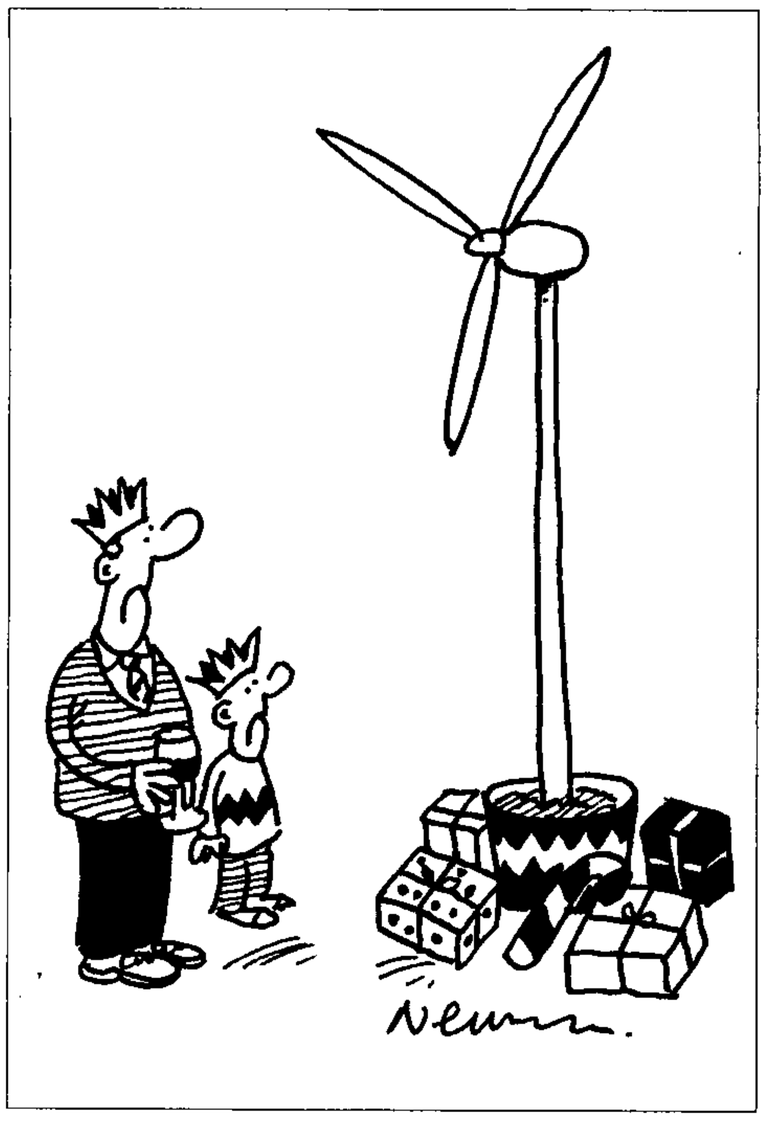
Impressive though the "CLOUD OF DOOM" (*Mirror*) which filled the skies above Hemel Hempstead was, the following day's front pages could not help trying to stretch it just a little bit further. The *Telegraph* reckoned it was a "75-mile arc of smoke" which nevertheless managed to reach "across England". The *Mail* cast its net wider – "A thick blanket a hundred miles wide lay across the South-East" – while the *Times* appeared to think that everywhere south of Birmingham was in darkness – "Toxic cloud chokes South". While the *Scotsman* was happy just to write off those on the other side of the border – "Fuel explosion throws a giant shadow across England" – the *Mirror* ensured that no one was left out: "FUEL DEPOT FIRE RAGES ON AS 1,500 SQ MILE TOXIC GAS CLOUD SPREADS ACROSS BRITAIN".

The fact that the skies above central London, less than 30 miles away from the scene of the blast, remained obstinately clear on Monday morning deterred the capital's paper not one jot. "TOXIC RAIN" shrieked the first edition of the *Evening Standard,* over the news that "Toxic rain was falling on London today as the pollution cloud from the Buncefield oil explosion grew." The fact that it quite evidently wasn't – according to the Met Office, the only rain in the capital that day was a light drizzle which occurred between 3am and 9am, long before the *Standard* hit the streets, and the biggest danger was that "it will make people dirty" – caused a rethink for later editions, which instead carried dire warnings that "POISON CLOUDS HIT TONIGHT" and quoted "environment experts" who "warned that the capital was likely to take the brunt of the fallout" of an event which had been, in the words of the headline "JUST LIKE AN N-BOMB BLAST".

The *Guardian*, however, was on hand the following morning to reassure its readers with some expert words from Dr Clare Lee, the leader of a team of Met Office scientists who had actually flown through the smoke cloud and tested samples of the particles in it. Her conclusion, printed on the paper's front page, was that "the cloud is really all soot, nothing more nasty than you'd get from a regular bonfire. It means it's not toxic to the world." How did the paper follow up this reassuring news? With a headline splashed across page 4: "Weather may drive toxic fallout south".

HISTORIC AGREEMENT





DIY DISASTER

LOWRI Turner, ex-presenter of the TV show *DIY SOS*, is now presiding over a DIY disaster of her own after writing a 1,000-word piece in the *Daily Mail* savaging fellow-parents at her son's school.

"There is an election this week for a parent governor," she informed *Mail* readers on 1 December. "Of course, this is prime smug Stay-at-Home-Mum territory, which is exactly why I have put my name forward. I think working parents like me should get a little of the input, not to mention applause."

The stay-at-home mothers, she claimed, spend their time leafing through the Boden catalogue or chatting aimlessly about soup recipes, having allowed their brains "to go as soft as overcooked spaghetti. They are intellectually stunted." Unlike Lowri Turner, who was "functioning intellectually" and "contributing to life" – presumably by presenting crappy TV shows and writing drivel in the *Mail*.

She admitted that she expected to be beaten in the election by a smug-moron parent.

However, her spectacularly bitchy *Mail* piece omitted a few facts. The election had actually been held many weeks earlier, and she had lost by a substantial margin. One of the spaghetti-brained, drivelling stay-at-home parents she was lambasting was former *Sunday Mirror* editor Paul Connew, her own ex-husband, who gave up his career to stay at home and look after their eldest child so she could pursue her media ambitions – but whom she abruptly ditched while pregnant with their second child, explaining that she was no longer satisfied with being the breadwinner.

Connew was also a candidate for the parent governorship – something else she forgot to mention. But the winner was a woman ridiculed in the *Mail* for "helping on [school] trips, being class rep and, wait for it, organising an organic vegetable box scheme for the school".

Thanks to this diatribe, Lowri has few friends at the school gate and seems unlikely to be welcomed at the local coffee mornings when her media career finally limps to a close.

JUST FANCY THAT!

PASSENGERS who last week won the battle to save the night train service linking Penzance to the capital were nearly called the Campaign for the Users of the Night Train Service – until someone realized that the acronym could be more appropriately applied to their First Great Western train operator.

HOW THEY ARE RELATED

WHILE Tony Blair enthuses about a new generation of nuclear power stations, they won't be built without Gordon Brown's backing. Luckily for the nuclear lobby, it has a few direct routes to the chancellor.

Key Brownite MP Yvette Cooper's father is none other than Tony Cooper, former chairman of the chief atomic lobby group, the Nuclear Industry Association. Tony Cooper became chairman of the Nuclear Industry Association in 2003; but in 2004 was put on to the board of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) as well. He was allowed to remain in charge of the Nuclear Industry Association while on the board of the NDA until the end of last year (although the NDA website incorrectly suggested Cooper was still riding both nuclear horses).

Yvette's dad has a number of other government jobs too, including a position on the board of the postal regulator, Postcomm. While Postcomm carefully notes that Cooper is father of the MP – and consequently father-in-law to Gordon's former economics adviser Ed Balls – under its "potential conflicts of interest" register, the NDA did not think this was important enough to put on its website.

The prime minister's backing for nuclear energy came easily. Firstly, a bunch of businessmen asked him to go atomic; secondly, scepticism about nuclear power runs deep in Labour's left wing, making a move in the opposite direction almost irresistible to Tory Blair. However, no firm is keen to build power stations without government guarantees, and Gordon Brown worries that these may turn into big financial liabilities.

As it happens, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority may be one way to give the nuclear industry the government backing it needs for new power stations: investors fear exposure to unquantifiable costs for cleaning up nuclear waste. However, if the NDA's current brief to deal with the "legacy" waste already produced by the atomic industry – itself a retrospective multi-billion subsidy – were extended to cover future waste to some degree, new power stations would look a lot more viable. Unfortunately for atom power enthusiasts, the NDA is not itself looking completely healthy: reports from within it suggest that the relationship between the chairman Anthony Cleaver and chief executive Iain Roxburgh is deteriorating to the point where ministers might want one of them to go.

HOW THEY ARE RELATED (2)

IT'S a welcome return to government for health consultant Paul Corrigan, who also happens to be married to Labour chief whip Hilary Armstrong, as he becomes health adviser at Number 10.

Until the election in May, Corrigan was special adviser to then Health Secretary John Reid (and before that Alan Milburn), and was instrumental in health reforms such as foundation hospitals, patient choice and "payment by results".

In the few months since his departure, however, these policies have been increasingly brought into question, with NHS trusts predicting deficits of £650m this year and many blaming the

reforms for the problems. The *Financial Times* reported three strategic health authorities having partially suspended payment by results for fear of the damage it would do to trusts with already serious deficits. In the same week the respected King's Fund think tank pointed out that the health service was not prepared to cope with the failures that would inevitably come with competition.

Corrigan clearly didn't expect to be riding to the rescue quite so soon, however. When he left the Department of Health in May to return to consulting, he contemplated a much grander future for himself, modestly telling the *Guardian* that "I will spend the rest of my days improving the public services because that is what I do".

GEORGE GALLOWAY, who has spent much of the past month representing his Bethnal Green and Bow constituents from stages in Aberdeen, Middlesbrough, Newcastle and Kuala Lumpur, managed to stop off on home ground recently, as the star attraction at a Respect Coalition fundraising event in London's Clapton.

In his speech the Gorgeous One made much of the eviction of 82-year-old delegate Walter Wolfgang from the Labour party conference, which he said typified the party's lack of respect for democracy.

Soon afterwards, a member of the audience stood up and began repeatedly yelling: "Why are you a fascist, George?" He was swiftly bundled out of the hall by a team of stewards, and the sound of scuffling and shouts could be heard outside the doors for several minutes.

HOME Office Minister Fiona McTaggart became emotional when she was forced to defend the government's march towards creating British Justice plc.

In last week's debate on privatisation of the probation service, she was attacked by MPs on all sides. Led by Labour's Austin Mitchell, they questioned the ludicrous plans which would allow private security companies to write the court reports recommending sentences for offenders from which their companies might ultimately profit – or, as Mitchell suggested, an officer from McTaggit Ltd recommending an electronic tagging curfew.

Mitchell clearly overstepped the mark when he suggested the minister's knowledge of institutions came from Cheltenham Ladies' College, "the potting shed of the English rose". Outside the chamber she accosted him to say he had been out of order. "That's blown my chances of being your PPS," he quipped. To which she had no reply.

"Just fuck off," she told him.

THERE are many ways for politicians to occupy themselves during speeches by Tory leaders, but members of the Welsh Assembly aren't content with simply jeering and heckling: they use the time to get their Christmas cards written.

As Welsh Coservative leader Nick Bourne rose to his feet to talk about the restructuring of Wales's four police forces, cameras in the assembly chamber caught senior Lib Dem Jenny Randerson, who was sitting behind him, taking out a stack of cards and nonchalantly beginning to pen her seasonal greetings.

JOINED-UP GOVERNMENT

7 December: Home Office launches consultation paper *Rebuilding Lives: supporting victims of crime* because "our vision is a criminal justice system in which the needs and concerns of victims and witnesses are central"

14 December: Home Office rejects calls for a public inquiry into the 7 July bombings, as requested by survivors and families of victims

BRUSSELS SPROUTS

BULGARIA isn't due to join the European Union until the first day of the new budget in 2007. But it is already wise to the ways of the EU. Cash intended to help its farming and forestry businesses prepare for membership is being siphoned off to help build... hotels and ski resorts!

Last month the Bulgarian newspaper *Zemya* gleefully reported another €68m handout from the EU's Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD). The money is supposed to be spent on the rural economy according to criteria laid down in Bulgaria's National Agricultural and Rural Development Plan (NARDP); and on the country's antiquated small meat and dairy farms there is plenty of need for it.

However, the Sofia-based environmental campaign group Za Zemiata found that many of the projects that have benefited from SAPARD cash are in fact neither agricultural nor rural. The funds have paid for new hotel projects on the Black Sea coast and construction at ski resorts, boosting the country's booming tourist trade but doing nothing for poor farmers or dilapidated villages. Grant money has also gone to large transnational food companies, despite the NARDP criteria supposedly prioritising small and medium sized, locally-run companies.

In a report titled *Far away from Brussels*, Za Zemiata also calls for an investigation into allegations of corruption in the Bulgarian agency handling the cash on behalf of the EU. Bulgarians who have tried to get details on how the scheme operates would have had more luck extracting blood from a stone. Indeed, the SAPARD agency won the country's Golden Padlock Award in 2002 after failing to respond to a single question asked under the country's freedom of information laws. Farmers have been quite unable to find out why they didn't qualify for rural grants while hotels in prospering coastal resorts did.

"If the current SAPARD Agency is not able to distribute its funds according to its own plans," notes the Za Zemiata report, "there is no indication that Bulgaria will be able to handle the funding through the CAP after accession in a way that can be called effective." Welcome aboard the gravy train!

EU-phemisms

You are fired

CON-SULTANTS

THE consultants' takeover of Number Ten nears completion with the appointment of Ian Watmore as head of the prime minister's delivery unit at the top civil service level of permanent secretary.

The ex-Accenture man will be able to "deliver" the ideas emerging from fellow former consultant David Bennett, appointed head of the policy unit this year from McKinsey.

Watmore was famously behind the National Insurance record system that came in £165m over budget and led to £100m in compensation payments, over which the government failed to take action for fear of damaging its "partnership relationship" with Accenture.

Meanwhile Sir Alistair Graham, chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, has criticised the way top appointments are made, which "will not help public concerns about mistrust and cronyism to go away".

Surely not?

AS THE amount of taxpayers' money spent on consultants each year soars past the £2bn mark while the government cuts civil service jobs to achieve its "efficiency" targets, one or two MPs are joining old campaigners like Austin Mitchell in trying to bring some accountability to the bonanza.

Lib Dem Martin Horwood has asked all Whitehall departments how they keep tabs on the consultants' work; how they decide if they're successful; and what they do if they aren't. For his trouble he has received a barrage of consultancy and Sir Humphrey-speak ("quality assurance", "gateway review processes", "key deliverables" etc), but little information.

On the specific question of how many of the thousands of contracts handed to consultants in the last five years had been unsuccessful and what sanctions had been imposed, not a single department could or would answer. The biggest consultancy spender, the Ministry of Defence (which can't say how much it spends – but it's in the hundreds of millions), typified government indifference towards scrutiny of the billions.

Minister Don Touhig explained that the information "is not held in the format requested and can be provided only at disproportionate cost" – something it appears the government is only prepared to incur on filling the consultants' pockets.

IT UPDATE

WHILE accusations flew that the explosions at Buncefield oil depot revealed poor disaster planning by the fire service, the incident certainly showed up problems for local authorities that have outsourced their IT.

Northgate Information Solutions' head office was seriously damaged in the explosion. The resultant disappearance of the Labour Party's website attracted some attention, but Northgate also runs IT services for several councils out of Hemel Hempstead. Back-up systems were also "rendered inoperable", according to a company statement.

Haringey's council tax and benefits system was out of action for several days, Hackney couldn't print payslips and Wandsworth's council tax, housing benefits and repairs services were all stymied too.

Number crunchings

£400,000,000

■ record sum raised by British public for victims of the Asian tsunami a year ago, which Tony Blair promised to "far and away more than match"

£275,000,000

■ total sum given by government

TV

Space Cadets (C4)

ALL telly execs have a story about the programme idea which, over lunch, seemed the perfect thing to do next.

Over a fifth brandy, commissioner and pitching producer plan which kind of tuxedo to wear at the dinner where they receive their BAFTAs for outstanding original contribution to the medium. But, the following morning, looking at the proposal scrawled on the back of a napkin, the slot baron realises that it is the kind of idea that appeals to a pissed audience of one rather than an evening audience of millions. He rings the talent: "Listen, mate..."

The problem with **Space Cadets** is that it's the viewer who's left to say "Listen, mate…" after the channel has spent £4m and cleared a fortnight of peak-time slots. In theory, it sounds like a smart idea: a group of twentysomething chavs will be tricked into thinking they are training at a Russian space base and that they've then gone up on a shuttle into orbit when, in reality, they never leave the ground in Suffolk. And, to be fair, the trails were mildly enticing.

In reality, though, the show is about as funny as the Challenger disaster. Although C4 have carefully chosen participants who are both fantastically dim and utterly irritating, it still rapidly begins to seem unfair that even people who have more intelligence in their mobile phones than their brains should be humiliated in this way across two weeks of network TV.

The peculiar rules of the contest, as stated at the outset, were that if those taking part completed the mission (ie, fail to spot what plonkers they are), they would receive a cheque for £25,000. The only known example in TV of people winning a prize for not working out what's going on, this would have served as a combination of health and safety measure and legal buy-off, intended to discourage the mock and indeed mocked astronauts from thumping or suing the production team. At around the half way mark even the production team appears to have had pangs of guilt and changed the prize on offer to five grand and a tour of the genuine Russian space programme HQ in Russia – or perhaps it just occurred to them that this was a golden opportunity for a follow-up programme. Maybe they could pretend that one's fake, too. The publicity for the series is filled with space puns ("The farce is with you" and so on) but the tag-line should really be: a giant leap for unkindness.

Friday 23 December
TITLE CHANGE
Richard Pryor: A Tribute (previously Richard Pryor: I Ain't Dead Yet)
N.B. This is the same programme under a different name. Billing remains the same.

ITV4 amendment

But, whatever its ethical problems, *Space Cadets* also simply doesn't work as television. Paradoxically, television shows that take the piss need to take themselves very seriously. Even if we know it's all a joke from the outset, the preparations for the mission and the eventual launch should feel like Apollo 13: pounding hearts and thumping music.

Yet, with Johnny Vaughan as host, TV's biggest winker apart from Jonathan Ross, the audience is constantly reminded that it's all a spoof. While Stephen Hawking was probably unavailable, a presenter with some science credentials – a James Burke or Peter Snow or even Carol Vorderman – could have made it funnier by playing with an absolutely straight face.

The bigger problem is that the whole stunt is, well, stunted. Whether the contestants know what's happening to them (*Big Brother*, *I'm A Celebrity*) or don't (*Candid Camera*, Jeremy Beadle, Noel Edmonds), the whole point of tease-TV is that those taking part endure some kind of physical or mental test.

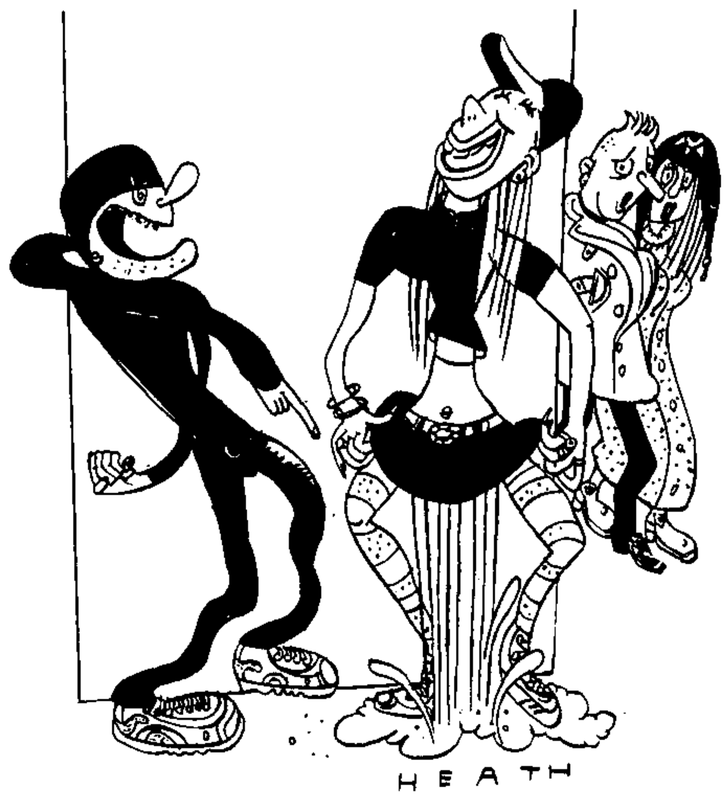
Will the anorexic actress manage to swallow the privates of some Aussie slug? How will the member of the public cope with the apparent fact that the house he left that morning for work seems no longer to be in the street when he comes home? The test also needs to develop. After eating the cricket's willy, the actress needs to be faced with the lizard's anal sphincter; pressing on the doorbell that belonged until that morning to his neighbours, the bewildered resident is met by actors playing strangers. Morally, all of this may be bad television but, judged from the angle of how to stage a prank, it's good television.

Space Cadets, though, fails as both jeopardy and escalation. There have been moments in *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here*... when the viewer has seriously worried that participants might die (two at least have been taken to hospital.) But the only risk to those taking part in this cosmonaut hoax is that, at the end of the fortnight, their pride might be bruised. At no point do they ever have to show any physical or mental toughness.

Also, this extremely limited risk never worsens or deepens. The joke on day one – that they all think they're going up in a rocket – remains exactly the gag on day ten. Reality television often claims to have learned from drama; but no fiction series would ever expect a single plot-line to sustain across ten episodes.

There's a remote possibility that the whole thing will be redeemed by a brilliant final twist. The number one view out in the telly blogosphere is that the whole thing's a joke and all the contestants are played by actors; but that would make it even more of a waste of time and create an even bigger case for waking up C4 executives in the middle of the night with spoof phone calls. Ground control to major network: there's definitely something wrong.

'Remote Controller'



"It was bad enough when everyone went around saying they were the only gay in the village"

DUMB BRITAIN

BBC Radio Gloucestershire

Presenter: The Battle of Bosworth Field was the last battle in what long war?
Contestant: The Boer War?
Presenter: I'll give you a clue. It was in 1485.
Contestant: The Crimean?

Danny Kelly show, Radio WM

Kelly: In which year did man first land on the moon?
Contestant: Can I have a clue?
Kelly: OK. I was born in 1970. My brother is a year older and this was the year he was born in.
Contestant: 1971.

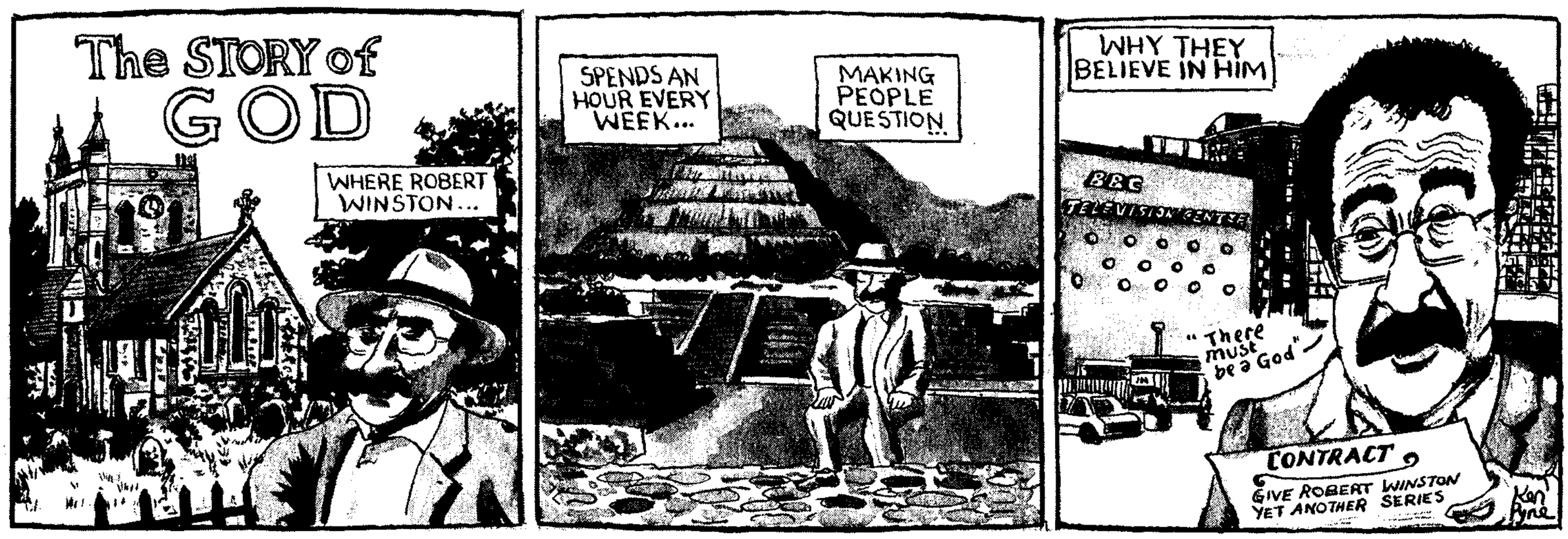
You Play We Pay, Richard And Judy, Channel 4

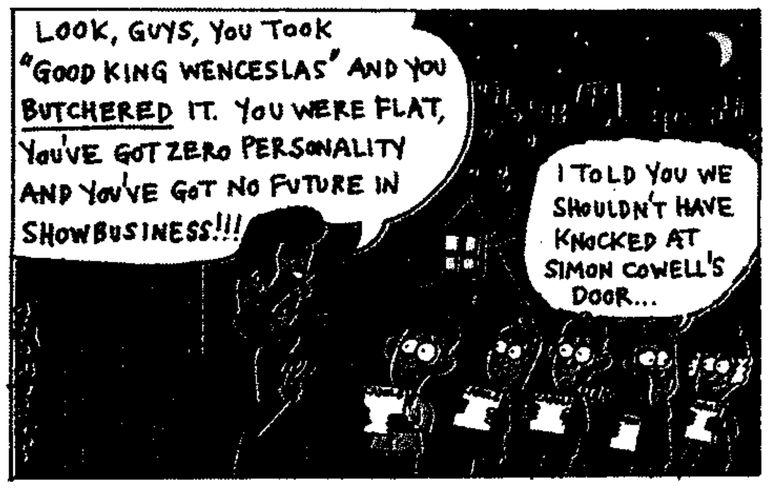
Contestant: You step in it and it takes you up and down to different floors.
Richard Madeley: Dog poo?

MEDIA NEWS

AN increasing proportion of ITV's lunchtime news bulletin is now soliciting the opinions of viewers on the day's designated topical issue, with those at home being encouraged to email, text or even send in their thoughts by video message via their mobile phones.

Much excitement was caused in the newsroom recently when the first ever punter decided to use this latest form of technology to share his views. Sadly the clip – of him extending his middle digit and requesting that ITN "stop asking people questions and do some of your own journalism you bunch of cunts" – was not thought suitable for broadcast.




LOOK, GUYS, YOU TOOK "GOOD KING WENCESLAS" AND YOU BUTCHERED IT. YOU WERE FLAT, YOU'VE GOT ZERO PERSONALITY AND YOU'VE GOT NO FUTURE IN SHOWBUSINESS!!!
I TOLD YOU WE SHOULDN'T HAVE KNOCKED AT SIMON COWELL'S DOOR...

THE BBC boasts that it has received "record volumes" of videos and still photos of the Buncefield fire from members of the public, "helping News 24 to outperform Sky throughout the day" – a clear priority for what is supposed to be a public service broadcaster untroubled by ratings.

So lots of fuzzy pictures of flames and smoke, then, taken by people who had been urged by police to stay away from the area. It took two hours for a trained BBC crew to arrive, leaving BBC News 24's Bill Turnball to fill by alleging that a plane had crashed on the site and that "there are reports of a big bang and lots of flames" over and over again.

LOUD peals of laughter at Televsion Centre greeted the announcement that the ITV News Channel is at last about to close.

On the *Ten*, Huw Edwards reported that the closure and the huge loss of jobs were designed "to enable the company to invest more money in its main news bulletins", ie the only ones that anybody watches.

The hundreds of BBC News journalists who are about to lose their jobs to pay for the Beeb's own pointless expansion into the digital future felt the irony acutely.

NICK ELLIOTT, the head of drama at ITV, recently got wind of a rumour that programming boss Simon Shaps had offered his job to Jane Tranter, the BBC's head of drama.

Sadly for Shaps, Elliott and Tranter are old mates so when he rang her she confirmed that, yes, Shaps had taken her out to lunch and, yes, she had been offered Elliott's job. Elliott confronted the slippery Shaps, who amazingly denied even knowing who Jane Tranter was. On further reflection he admitted to having had lunch with her but said she must have misunderstood what he said.

Perhaps it was a very noisy restaurant. But how fortunate that the "misunderstanding" was rectified before Tranter handed in her notice!

Number crunchings

£15.5m

- bonuses awarded to BBC staff in past year
- cost of 30 hours of original BBC drama

VIEWERS of *Married to the Prime Minister*, the pre-Christmas plug for the paperback version of her book *The Goldfish Bowl* which Channel 4 gracefully allowed Cherie Blair, could hardly fail to sympathise with its subject.

As Ms Blair spoke bravely of the torment she had suffered at the hands of the press, images of broadsheet newspapers flashed across the screen, their headlines boldly displayed, "BIG-HIPPED HEFFALUMP" and "FRUMPY HAUSFRAU" prominent among them.

What publications had dared to traduce the prime minister's wife so blatantly? Er, none. Although the *Sunday Mirror*'s Carole Malone used both phrases to describe Cherie, she did so on the same single occasion, in her column of 23 February 2003. Both appeared in the second paragraph, in standard 8-point script.

HOW REALITY TV WORKS

THE *Sun* was delighted to have rumbled the big secret behind Channel 4's *Space Cadets* – that contestant Ryan McBride was not in fact "a member of the public fooled into thinking he is being sent into space" but an actor who had risen to the giddy heights of appearing in a "high profile" Give Blood advert with Gordon Ramsay.

The following day it had even more alarming news – his companion Keri Hasset had appeared in reality TV show *Cruel Summer 2* on satellite channel Trouble TV. "Channel 4 chiefs are investigating," the paper noted sombrely.

This, at least, should not take long. McBride and Hasset were recruited, as are the bulk of "reality" stars these days, through talent agencies which act as a middleman between production companies and those desperate for TV exposure in any form whatsoever. As well as sending out regular emails informing their tens of thousands of paying clients of auditions for the latest products of the Endemol stable – as well as castings for more standard "extra" work such as the ad in which McBride appeared – many will host online showreels and CVs in which showbiz hopefuls are allowed to describe themselves as anything they like – hence the storm in August when the *Sun* similarly "outed" *Big Brother* contestant Makosi Musambasi as an actor, helping her to an early eviction and a hostile reception from the crowd, merely because she had entered her fantasy profession into agency Envenio's database rather than her real one.

More interesting was the true status of the three contestants who Channel Four admitted were "actors", in on the joke and included to help things along if their companions became suspicious. While Ranie Daw and Steve Hester have some short film and theatre credits to their names, Charlie Skelton is best known as a comedy writer, co-author of a book with Victoria Coren, and, perhaps most importantly, to *Space Cadets* producer Ben Caudell as "my friend Charlie Skelton".

When the initial squad of 12 was whittled down to those who would actually board the fake shuttle, which of the three "actors" was picked to accompany the stooges? Unsurprisingly, Charlie Skelton – despite his complete lack of any acting skills having already led to several of the contestants announcing they thought he was a plant.

Caudell and Skelton's relationship is, however, not as close as that of two other members of the production team. According to the credits, the programme's "stylist" is one Antonia Vaughan – a promising newcomer to TV who just happens to have been married to *Space Cadets* presenter Johnny Vaughan for the past six years. Her sterling work in the role was evident in the two brown parka jackets that Vaughan alternated to present the entire series. Nice to see the £4m budget that Channel 4 splashed on the show being used so well!

CHRISTMAS PANTO

"POSH panto" is all the rage in luvvieland this season. Sir Ian McKellen, Simon Callow, John Rhys-Davies and other distinguished thesps are leading the "renaissance of a great British tradition", according to the *Daily Telegraph*, rescuing pantomime from minor celebs, fading pop stars and soap-opera has-beens.

The shows in which most of the top luvvies appear are created by First Family Entertainment (FFE), a new company set up by Howard Panter of Associated Theatre Group and David Ian of Clear Channel, two big cheeses of the commercial theatre world. According to a shameless puff-piece in the *Telegraph* on 5 December, the genre was pretty much on its knees before Sir Ian was persuaded to don a pair of tights. "The man known to millions as Gandalf waved his wand and at one transformative stroke brought a dash of health-giving respectability to this enfeebled branch of our theatrical tradition." You'd hardly guess from this that of the 250 commercially produced pantomimes in the UK, a mere eight are FFE productions.

Actually, the company that has done most to revive the knockabout art in recent years is Qdos, which stages scores of pantos all over Britain and brings in much-needed cash to struggling regional theatres. It also provides many children with their first experience of live theatre.

Qdos shows are dismissed as "tosh for the unwashed" by FFE's metropolitan puffers. Yet FFE itself has booked Caprice, Melinda Messenger, Twiggy, Patsy Kensit, Stephen Gately and Peter Duncan, and even Qdos cast-offs such as Bobby Davro and Rory the Tiger from Haven Holidays. For all its bluster about new creative standards, the company also takes many of its directors, designers, choreographers and musical directors from Qdos. And if the posh-panto brigade is so contemptuous of its larger rival, why did FFE's two backers, ATG and Clear Channel, both try to buy Qdos not long ago? FFE was set up only after their bids had failed.

Although its ticket prices are higher than those for normal pantos, some observers in theatreland doubt whether FFE can make money while shelling out vast sums on Oscar-winning stars. The suspicion is that it will last a few years, then end in tears and, er… be sold to Qdos.

Meanwhile the torrent of hype continues. Susan Hampshire, who is starring with Richard Wilson in a new "upmarket" *Cinderella*, turned up on BBC TV's breakfast programme a couple of weeks ago to plug her show, lavish praise on FFE and criticise its rivals for "corrupting" pantomime's noble traditions. Surprisingly, she omitted to mention that her husband, Sir Eddie Kulukundis, is the chairman of ATG, which not only owns the theatre where she is appearing but is also the joint-owner of FFE.

SUPERMODELS

KERBER

ARE YOU GONNA LEAVE MINCE PIES OUT FOR SANTA CLAUS?
NO THAT'S SILLY. I'M TOO OLD TO BELIEVE IN..
FOOD!
YOUNG GIRL WEEKLY
LITTLE GIRL VOGUE
101 BULIMIA TIPS

DOING THE ROUNDS

SHOULD Bedford pensioner Yvonne Watts be able to claim back the cost of her private hip operation in France?

Mrs Watts decided to pay £3,900 for immediate overseas treatment instead of waiting in pain for four months on the NHS, but lost a High Court claim to recoup the money in 2003 (see *Eyes passim*). The advocate-general of the European Court of Justice has now spotted that the NHS has no proper procedures to assess applications for treatment abroad, and the court will give a final ruling in the spring.

Given "new" Labour's endorsement of a free market in healthcare, with unfair sweeteners thrown at private companies to encourage them to compete with the NHS, it seems churlish to deny Mrs Watts reimbursement, especially given that many NHS trusts have already sent elderly women off to France on the "bruise cruise" to get their hips and knees replaced.

The difference here is that Mrs Watts organised the treatment off her own bat, without the prior agreement of her local PCT. The government is allegedly keen on patients making autonomous choices under its "Choose and Book" system, and the European court may decide that denying repayment in effect restricts the rights of patients to seek and receive treatment outside the NHS.

Opening up European hospitals to NHS patients might also help solve some of the service's perennial problems. On the night of 4 December, a paediatric consultant in an East Anglian district general hospital was unable to find a single paediatric intensive care unit (PICU) bed in England for a critically ill 10-month child, who had to be inappropriately placed in an adult intensive care unit.

In Manchester, specialist children's beds are closed and lists cancelled because of a lack of specialist staff; and children are being ventilated on wards outside intensive care. Research suggests that such children may be three times as likely to die as those on PICU, but should such a disaster occur, the cause of death may never be proven because of a dire shortage of NHS pathologists to perform post-mortem examinations.

Anecdotally, many hospitals report shortages of paediatric intensive care beds, but press reports of this scandal have died away over the last five years since journalists have been prevented from contacting the emergency bed service to ascertain the number of ICU beds. Given that we have targets to see (usually fit) patients in casualty and to treat those undergoing non-urgent surgery, it seems bizarre that there are no such targets for securing acceptable treatment for critically ill children.

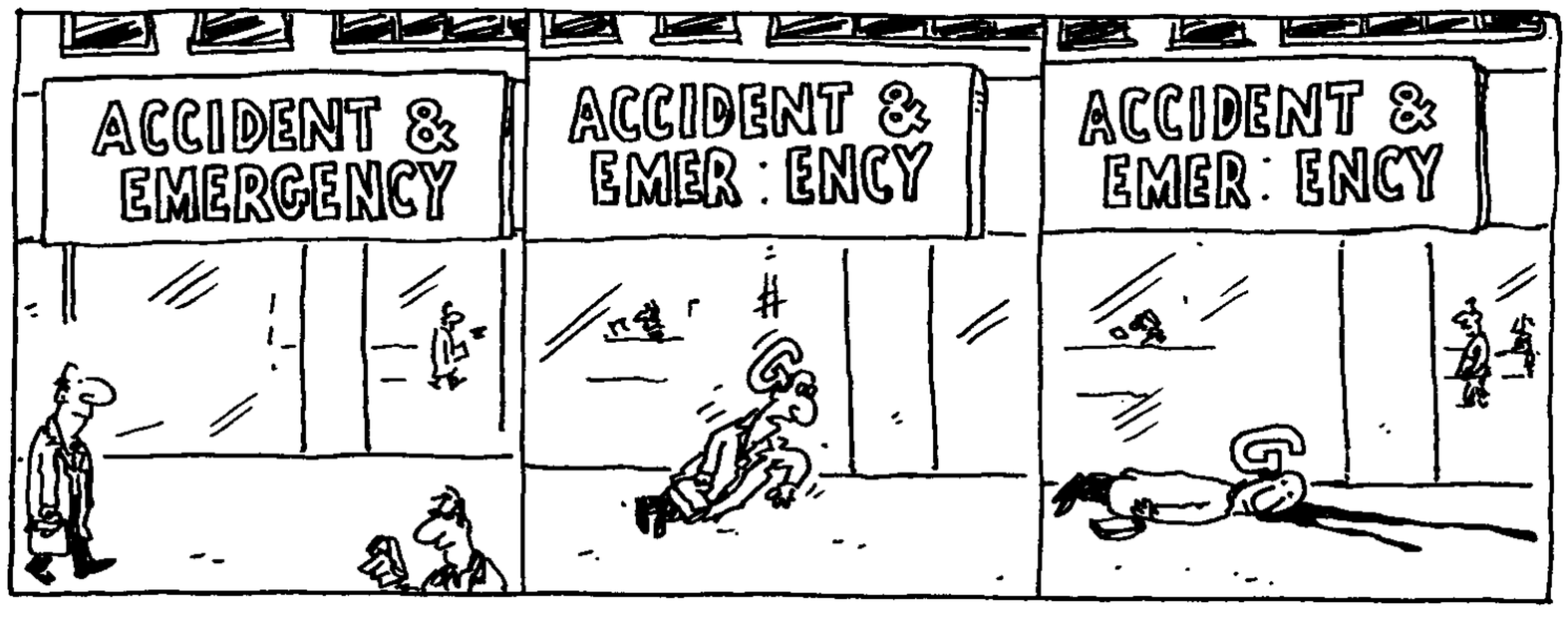
If Mrs Watt's hip challenge is successful, why shouldn't these children be transferred to intensive care beds in Europe by helicopter? It'd certainly be quicker and less stressful than the usual mercy dashes up and down UK motorways in the middle of winter. Alas, this will never happen because PCTs have no money to reimburse anyone, and sick children are not seen as a government priority. Breast cancer, however, is a big vote-winner and as M.D. predicted, PCTs are counting the cost of Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt's premature pledge to tests all women with non-metastatic disease to see if they're likely to respond to (as yet unlicensed) Herceptin (*Eyes passim*).

The NHS is already £620m in the red and Hewitt has just landed it with a bill for a further £100m. As Eastern Birmingham PCT chief executive Sophie Christie put it: "Will Ms Hewitt please tell PCTs whether paediatric, cardiac, other cancer or chronic conditions services should be cut to fund Herceptin?" Critically ill children will just have to wait their turn.

M.D.

off your trolley

REEVE & WAY



SIGNAL FAILURES

Kent fault SET

A NATIONAL Audit Office probe shows that state-owned South Eastern Trains did rather well after taking over from Connex South Eastern, but "new" Labour prefers not to learn the lessons.

SET demonstrated "that the successful termination of a train operating company's franchise is feasible, and that taxpayers' and passengers' interests can be protected," said NAO chief Sir John Bourn. His report shows the subsidy demanded by Connex in 2003 (an agreed £200m plus a £250m bailout) was 9 percent higher than SET's subsidy. The NAO says SET paid for: 260 extra workers (mainly drivers and station staff) to redress CSE's understaffing; staff pay rises; and painting and "deep cleaning" stations neglected by Connex.

Since April 2005 SET has focused on "improving the value of the business" for reprivatisation, funding investments to be passed on to the next private operator. The NAO reveals that officials considered putting CSE on a "management contract", like nine other failed franchises. The report says: "Such contracts are not a fully effective means of controlling a train operating company's costs"; and by contrast "SET's costs to the taxpayer have… been well controlled". In that case, why was so much public cash (*Eyes passim*) used to prop up failed franchises through management contracts, instead of returning them to state hands? And why are some franchises, including Virgin's, *still* kept alive and in profit with enormous cash transfusions under management contracts?

WINNING the Kent franchise, which will supplant SET, boosted transport company Go Ahead after its recent failure to acquire Bournemouth's council-owned bus firm.

Go Ahead already operates buses in the area and chief executive Chris Moyes is annoyed that the council chose not to grant his firm an unregulated local monopoly but instead is selling to Transdev, part-owned by Paris's nationalised bus and rail operator. Moyes grumbled in *Buses Focus* magazine: "We are questioning whether Transdev as a publicly-owned French organisation should be allowed to outbid us."

Interesting. Go Ahead won the Kent franchise because its joint venture with Keolis, a subsidiary of French state rail, outbid other firms. So publicly-owned French organisations are OK if they're in bed with Moyes… but not when they're against him.

AS THE *Eye* predicted, "new" Labour was happy to ignore FirstGroup's extortionate bus-fare increases when awarding lucrative rail franchises (*Eye* 1145). FirstGroup won two of the three on offer, Thameslink and "greater western".

FirstGroup didn't like the *Eye* pointing out that its fuel is price-capped for the year, while it blamed high fuel prices for Sheffield's fourth bus-fare rise in a year. Accusing the *Eye* of "ignorance", FirstGroup said its total fuel bill was around £26m higher this year. Here's another fact FirstGroup, which carries 2.8m UK bus passengers daily, would rather people didn't know: charging each UK bus passenger just 2.6p more would net almost £27m extra in a year, more than covering FirstGroup's extra fuel cost for its buses, trains and 20,000 American school buses.

So why have bus fares risen by so much more than 2.6p? Some Devon passengers have seen fares rise by 80p (33 percent). Last week fares in Somerset jumped by up to 22 percent (80p), despite local increases in June (by up to 23 percent) and March.

The answer came from Gary Nolan, who heads First South Yorkshire – Britain's fifth most profitable bus firm in 2003-4. Nolan moaned that profits were falling: "You may as well put that money in the bank. You would get better interest." Yes please! Many passengers would be delighted if WorstGroup banked its cash and let someone else run the buses. Other bus firms, which weren't shielded from the late-summer fuel-price hike, haven't raised fares as much as WorstGroup and are better at maintaining buses (*Eyes passim*).

'Dr B. Ching'

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

TREBBLES ALL ROUND

A ROTTEN BOROUGHS story about how Scarborough Borough Council was covering up the truth about a costly sea defences fiasco drew an angry letter from the council's chief executive, John Trebble.

Eye 1142 reported that Mr Trebble had vowed that councillors and the public would "never, ever" see the so-called Penn Report -- an inquiry by consultant Richard Penn into what went wrong. The project ended up £14m over budget after the council illegally hired a firm of engineering consultants without putting the job out to tender. A bogus "best value" report was prepared in an attempt to cover up irregularities.

Mr Trebble wrote: "I have never made any such statement, and nor would I, since I have always been aware that it is possible that the Freedom of Information Commissioner could rule that the Penn Report be published by the council." In other words: "We might tell the truth eventually, but only if it is dragged out of us." The council has refused FoI requests from the Eye and the Scarborough Evening News, so appeals have been submitted to the commissioner.

Happily, the Eye is now in a position to figure out the conclusions of the report. In August, confidential advice to the council's appointments committee from head of human resources Roger Kaye outlined two options in regard to Mr Trebble.

The first was for an independent investigator to examine "allegations" (in the Penn Report) that the chief executive had "failed to ensure that key programmes of work relating to coastal protection were implemented, having full regard to the constitution of the council, standing orders, EU and UK procurement rules", and that he had "failed to ensure that appropriate management control systems were in place that would have ensured the efficient management and execution of the council's functions in respect of... coastal protection contracts..."

All of which would have been costly and embarrassing to examine further. The second option was to allow Mr Trebble to take early retirement. This he is doing at the end of the month, with a glowing reference. In his resignation letter to the council, a copy of which has found its way to the Eye, one of Mr Trebble's conditions for departure was for "the council... not to make the Penn report public now or at any time in the future, unless compelled to by the Information Commissioner".

SPANNER IN THE WORKS

IN THE DEEP mid-winter many Britons' thoughts turn to a holiday in one of Europe's smarter ski resorts: Chamonix, Verbier, Kitzbuhel... Ipswich.

Mid-Suffolk District Council will decide next year whether to approve plans for a £300m development to cover an old quarry with a "snow dome" containing a 400m ski-run, plus 350 chalets, ice-rink, hotel, bars, restaurants, shops, etc.

"Snoasis", at Great Blakenham near Ipswich, is the brainchild of property developer Godfrey P. Spanner. Tory-controlled Mid-Suffolk council is clearly impressed, and Mr Spanner says he has received letters of support from Sports Minister Richard Caborn and the British Olympic Committee.

Mr Spanner's backers must be confident that his Onslow (Suffolk) company will have more success than other recent ventures. A scheme in West Sussex, where Onslow (Ditchling) planned a five-acre industrial development, is in the hands of an administrator.

A larger project at Newhaven, where a 25-acre industrial estate was to be built, saw the Newhaven Development Company Ltd (formerly Onslow Eastside) subject to a compulsory wind-up notice in October 2004. One local engineer was left with an unpaid bill of £50,000. An estate agent, who is still waiting for his fee, said: "Spanner always promises a large fee whenever the deal is complete. The trouble is, I have yet to see him complete anything."

Let's hope things don't go "downhill" (geddit?) at Snoasis too!

● THERE seems to be some difficulty understanding the word "No" at Tory-controlled East Devon District Council (EDDC), which for some reason – possibly to do with the large sum that would come from selling the lease -- is keen to see a giant Walmart-Asda supermarket built on the banks of the beautiful River Exe estuary. Locals overwhelmingly rejected the idea in a public consultation and local MP Hugo Swire presented a 10,000-plus signature petition against it to parliament in July.

Now EDDC, ignoring both consultation and petition, is touting the supermarket plan around local schools, where children as young as 12 are being given voting papers on the proposals.

Council leader Sara Randall Johnson has confirmed that these "ballots" will be included in the assessment of the latest "consultation", due to end on 24 January. Many parents are angry that children are being used as voting fodder for a scheme the grown-ups have already rejected.

MP Swire became a member of David Cameron's shadow cabinet earlier this month. Perhaps the new environmentally-friendly Tories at Westminster need to have a word with their unreconstructed Devon colleagues about the political advisability of building supermarkets at beauty spots?

JINGLE BILLS

CHRISTMAS surprise of the year was the £27,000 "service" charge bill presented to pensioners John and Winifred Hutchings by the London borough of Southwark.

The couple are among thousands of former tenants who bought their council flats under "right to buy" legislation without realising the council would be able to slap extortionate charges on them for repairs such as the renewal of external cladding on blocks of flats, or instalment of double-glazing.

When Mr Hutchings, 77, who has cancer, told Southwark he didn't have that sort of money, he was told he could pay it off over 25 years. Three weeks later he received a "corrected" bill -- for £26,900! This time he was given three weeks to pay or face court.

The good news for Mr Hutchings and other former tenants is that an investigation by Southwark's own leaseholder management unit concluded that in many cases, because of the council's failure to consult leaseholders properly, the council would be unable to justify the service charges in court. The bad news is that the council's incompetence has left a £7m hole in its finances... which all council taxpayers will have to fill.

DAME GELD

WHAT'S sauce for the Tory goose in the London borough of Westminster is not, apparently, sauce for the Labour gander.

In 1998 the Conservative council reimbursed £240,000 towards legal costs incurred by Tory councillors Barry Legg, Alex Segal and Miles Young during the investigation by the district auditor into the "Homes for Votes" scandal under Dame Shirley Porter's leadership (Eyes passim ad nauseam).

Although the three were found not guilty of "wilful misconduct", Segal and Young were found to have not done all they reasonably could to protect the council and the public from Porter's misconduct and its consequences. Legg was criticised by the DA for his failure to "speak up".

Earlier this year the opposition Labour group leader Paul Dimoldenberg successfully defended himself against a Tory-inspired Standards Board case that he had "brought the council into disrepute" by accusing the council, on the Today programme, of dragging its feet in collecting the £42m surcharge owed by Dame Shirley Porter for having gerrymandered the borough in the 1980s. Because of the ensuing hoo-ha Westminster belatedly intensified its efforts to get Porter to cough up what she owed. In July 2004 she stumped up £12.3m, even tough she had previously stated under oath she was down to her last £300,000.

Cllr Dimoldenberg was cleared by the Adjudication Panel of bringing the council into disrepute and no action was taken against his technical infringement of the code of conduct for passing on confidential information. Following Dimoldenberg's case the code was changed to take into account circumstances where disclosure was protected if it was in the public interest.

To clear his name over a matter of clear public interest, Dimoldenberg had to pay m'learned friends £46,000. He asked Westminster's Standards Committee if the council could reimburse half that sum. It voted 3 to 1 against doing so, with the committee's two Tory members ganging up with an independent against one Labour councillor.

The Conservatives on the committee were Colin Barrow, deputy leader of the council, and Melvyn Caplan, who happened to be leader of the council in 1998 when his Tory chums got their £240,000 payout. Just fancy that.

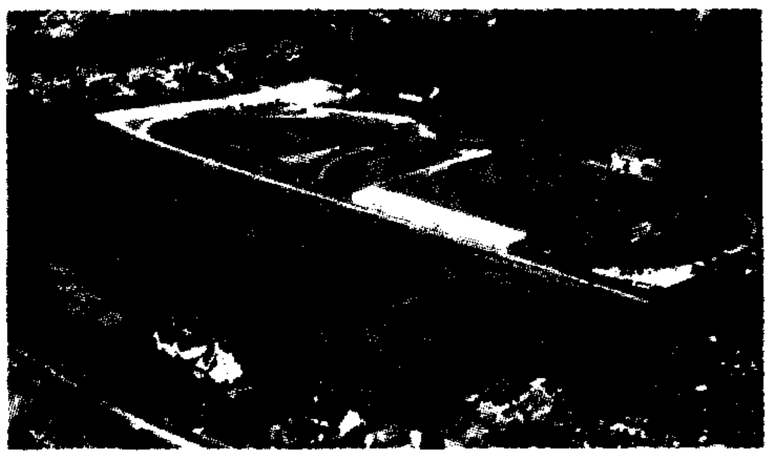
LEVELLING THE PLAYING FIELDS

WITH an indoor arena, three all-weather pitches, a cricket field with new pavilion, a floodlit soccer pitch and an athletics track, plus parking for more than 1,500 cars, Odsal Sports Village sounds like an impressive plan.

Bradford Bulls Rugby League Club has been keen to redevelop Odsal Stadium for some time; and Bradford City Council needs to be seen to be tackling its status as Britain's second most unfit city (after London).

However, in order to raise the funds for the joint project, the council plans to flog... 47 acres of playing fields elsewhere in Bradford for a housing development.

Horsfall Playing Fields may just be a big open grassy space with sports pitches and a running



track marked out, compared with the grand plans at Odsal; but it is well used and enjoyed by everyone from kids' football teams and teenagers having a kickabout to kite-flyers and dog walkers. The top team to play at Horsfall – Bradford Park Avenue – has been offered a new home at the sports village; but other teams fear the fancier facilities will come with a price tag.

Bulls boss Chris Caisley claims the "village" will prevent talented athletes from having to travel to Leeds for high quality facilities. But that will hardly improve the fitness of the casual users of Bradford's open space.

Meanwhile campaigners to save Horsfall have discovered in the council's archives that in 1928, the then Bradford Corporation was given grants by the National Playing Fields Association and the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. According to minutes, the grants were accepted on condition that the fields remained in recreational use. Despite apparently not having the right to sell the land, the council insists turning it into housing is the only way it can afford its big shiny project.

Letters

Anagram

Sir,

The Tories can look forward to a fairytale relationship with the electorate, because the letters of Cameron spell Romance. Some may scoff, but I was converted to Anagramarianism when I learnt that Leni Riefenstahl re-arranged spells "senile Hitler fan". There's some power at work here.

JOHN DEANE,

Natal, South Africa.

Noam mart

Sir,

I am relieved that Noam Chomsky does not deny that the massacre of Srebrenica took place. His chum Edward S. Herman did deny it, however, and was quoted doing so in the Morning Star on 10 July this year.

It should not be forgotten that Chomsky and Herman did write an article together for the Nation (US equivalent of the New Statesman) on 25 June 1977, which denied that Pol Pot was a mass-murderer.

Yours sincerely,
TOM CARTER,

Somerton, Somerset.

Hymn and her

Sir,

Re: What you missed, Eye 1146. At risk of being even more pedantic than some of your other correspondents Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens) did not write Morning Is Broken. It was written long before he was born by the author Eleanor Farjeon, and it is a hymn.

Yours,
RAJ KOTHARI,

Bridport, Dorset.

Very funny

Sir,

Is there any chance of publishing the same The Commuters cartoon (Eyes 1146 and 1147) a third time in case anyone missed it during the busy run-up to Christmas?

Yours etc,
MARTIN SHEPHERD,

Via email.

Check in the post

Sir,

The BBC and the Eye clearly didn't look far enough for the Post Office's FoI Publication Scheme.

As I understand it the Post Office is part of the Royal Mail Group. Their FoI Publication Scheme which amounts to 23 pages is to be found at: http://www.royalmailgroup.com/contactus/Freedom_of_Information_V2-1.pdf

Elsewhere it says that "the Company Secretary, Royal Mail Group plc has overall responsibility for this scheme and the senior managers in charge of each of our business units will be accountable for implementation within their units".

So the Company Secretary of Royal Mail Group is your man and he or she is legally responsible for enforcing your request.

A FoI request can be handed to any member of staff of a public organisation and then given 20 working days to process the request.

Anyone who has dealt with the media is used to them wanting the information immediately. Well the Act gives the Royal Mail or other organisation 20 days – first to identify whether the information is available and then to process the request.

Yours sincerely
NICK LANDAU (ex-NHS FoI Officer),

London SW16.

Brussels spout

Sir,

Dr B. Ching (Eye 1147) is right to point out the absurdities of the French train franchise, but he does not point out the underlying reason why it does not matter a sou whether the Labour Conference or Parliament passes resolutions or Acts insisting that such franchises should be British. The EU requires all such contracts be offered for tender to all EU states. There is nothing the UK can do about it – except leave the EU of course.

Yours faithfully,
PHILIP FOSTER,

Cambridge.

All Greek

Sir,

I fear that Jason Cowley's literary memory ("and more...", p7) may be at fault. The lines he attributes to Shelley are actually a translation (very possibly by Shelley, though I can't vouch for that) of a Greek Epigram attributed to Plato, and written in memory of Plato's teacher Socrates (d.399BC), and preserved in Anthologia Lyrica Graeca. What they aren't is a tribute to Keats, for whom Shelley wrote the full-length poem "Adonais"...

Yours pedantically,
BILL CAMPBELL,

Almeria, Spain.

The Red Face of Gnome

Sir,

A flag commemorating the death of George Best showed "the red clenched fist of the Irish paramilitary terror group the Red Hand of Ulster" (Eye 1147)? No such organisation: they were/are the Red Hand Commando, named after the ancient heraldic symbol of the old kingdom of Ulster which is, er, a red hand – open, not clenched. And as for that flag: a red hand at the centre of a cross of St George... hmm... sounds uncannily like, er, the official flag of Northern Ireland during Best's heyday. I wonder if they are by any chance related?

EDNA B. PAISLEY,

Via email.

...Sorry to spoil your story about the West Ham fan's tribute to George Best (Eye 1147), but the flag he was waving was almost certainly the old Northern Ireland government flag, which went out of official use following the introduction of direct rule in 1972. Although widely displayed in loyalist areas of Northern Ireland, it does not signify allegiance to any terrorist organisation and certainly not to "The Red Hand of Ulster", which does not even exist.

GEOFFREY WARNER,

Via email.

...Could it be that your contributor was overcome, tired and emotional at George's passing or perhaps an escaped BBC/Channel 4 hack displaying their usual impeccable impartiality in respect of this part of the world snuck in with the article.

NEIL McKELVIE,

Belfast.

...Could you please make a New Year's resolution to get out a bit more, like further north of Watford, or at least to use Google Images to stem your bile. If you put "flag northern Ireland" into Google Images you will notice that the flag is a thin red cross with a red hand in the centre of it. The cross is that of the Catholic St Patrick while the red hand belongs to the equally Catholic O'Neill family and refers to a medieval legend about the fight for land. England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have their own flags as well as the Union flag, as can be seen at any football match.

Should the flag of St George be banned because of its use by the BNP or the tricolour of the Irish Republic be hidden away because of its use by Sinn Fein/PIRA? The flag of Northern Ireland will overcome its misuse by a vicious rabble as will the tricolour.

ROB TEE,

Liverpool.

...Just to add to the deluge of mail I expect you have received about your George Best article in the latest issue. To be honest, the article would not have been out of place in your spoof news section but its presence in the news section merely demonstrates a breathtaking ignorance, not just about football but of current affairs generally. The flag in question was the Northern Ireland flag, in official use up until 1972 and still the FIFA-approved flag of the NI football team.

And as for the "Irish Paramilitary group The Red Hand of Ulster", what can one say? There has never been such a group, a fact that I would estimate would take the average journalist less than a minute to find out, even on a Friday lunchtime.

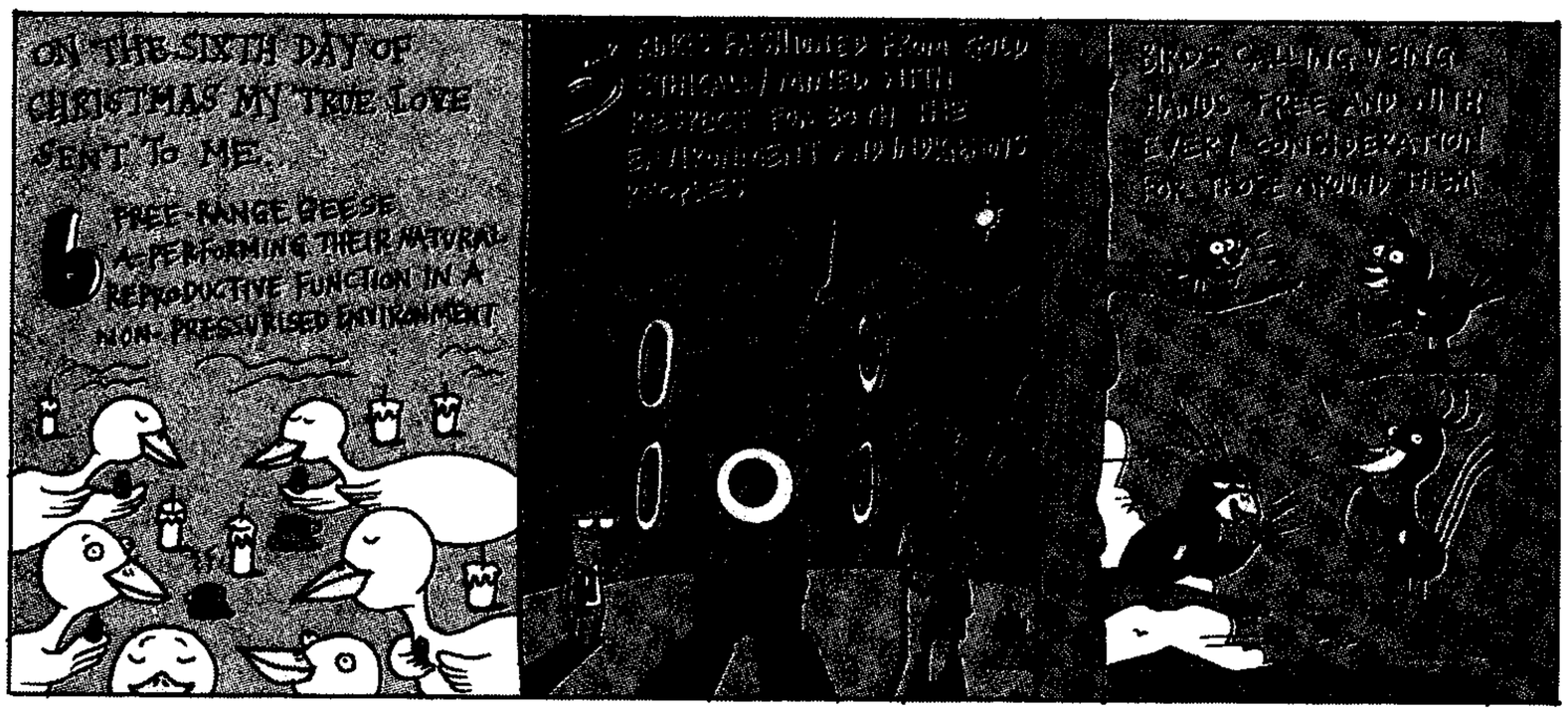
Don't you have a section in your own publication for such ill-researched stories? I look forward to reading Street of Shame next week.

DARREN HUNTER,

Oxford.

● Thanks for the many letters rightly pointing out these errors. We would like to apologise for this piece to all concerned. Ed.

TWELVE GRIM DAYS OF CHRISTMAS KNIFE & PACKER


ON THE SIXTH DAY OF CHRISTMAS MY TRUE LOVE SENT TO ME...
6 FREE-RANGE GEESE A-PERFORMING THEIR NATURAL REPRODUCTIVE FUNCTION IN A NON-PRESSURISED ENVIRONMENT

Scenes You Seldom See

"As much as I appreciate the Christmas bonus, I'd much prefer to see it spent on some new office carpets and a few pictures to brighten up reception"

Field of dreams

Sir,

Your mention of Mr Prescott's involvement in the Brighton Community Stadium is the sort of inaccurate reporting that the nimbys of Falmer love to read. It is in fact a field at the back of Brighton University, next to the main A27 dual carriageway (10,000 cars a day) and the railway line between Lewes and Brighton. Further, when the new national park replaces the AONB, this area, for good reason, will not be in it.

Yes the club's original ground was sold, but by someone akin to a conman who tried, against Football League rules, to change the constitution so that he could profit. It took many years for the club rid themselves of this pariah. It's all very well documented in a book called "Build a Bonfire", so I will not go any further.

What should be of concern about the latest step in this affair is the Lewes District Council's decision to press for a legal review, seemingly against the wishes of their electorate, who not surprisingly, would like to see the money spent on flood relief, given the disaster of five years ago.

The decision was taken in secret by the council's cabinet, and they are now steadfastly refusing to answer questions, even it would seem from other councillors, on the grounds that it is only a local issue for Kingston Ward members, despite the fact that all residents will be required to foot not only the council's, but the government's legal bill should they fail.

One also has to remember that the Brighton and Hove community stadium is not actually in LDC but, as the name implies, Brighton. Further this is the very same council that allowed Glyndebourne to build an auditorium right in the middle of the Downs.

Definitely one for the rotten boroughs column I think.

Keep up the good work.

IAN CROSSAN,

Eastbourne.

SOLUTIONS

"Camden Council Parking Solutions Call Centre is now open 24 hours a day" – *traffic wardens*

Overcast Sky

Sir,

Re the article about Sky+ on page 13 of the current Eye: software updates to Sky+ boxes are not delivered through the phone line – that's for interactive services (eg voting, and so on) as well as supporting billing functions (watch a pay-per-view movie and your Sky box "phones home" so that your account can be charged). Software updates to Sky+ boxes are broadcast from the satellite, which is how, even though our Sky+ box hasn't been connected to a phone for two years, we still suffered the "live pause" problem.

What you missed reporting is that these PVR boxes are owned not by Sky but by the subscribers, but their key functionality is only enabled by subscription to Sky (£10 per month, which is waived if you subscribe to – if I recall correctly – two premium services). This can be compared to paying a monthly fee to Ford so that petrol in the fuel tank can be admitted to the engine of your Mondeo.

PETER McCORMACK,

Via email.

Judge and jury

Sir,

I think it is a bit over the top to suggest ("Jobs for the Girl", In the back, 1147) that PA Consulting can be "more relaxed about legal qualms over the controversial (identity) cards" simply because a member of their board is a non-executive director at the Department for Constitutional Affairs. Do you really think that Lord Falconer and senior DCA officials can be rolled over by a non-executive director? And why does the conspiracy always go the same way? Isn't it at least as preposterous to suggest that Lady Judge is the DCA's mole, and will be working against PA's interests to ensure that the Lord Chancellor's "legal qualms" scupper the ID card scheme?! Anyway, hope you all have a merry Christmas.

Yours faithfully,
DAVID IRELAND,

Walthamstow, London.

Colemanballs

£10 paid for contributions

"... if he [David Cameron] chooses this route, he'll find it a very, very hard road to plough."

MICHAEL PORTILLO, BBC
(Neil Barnden)

"They've got to be breaking that voodoo over Sweden."

LEE DIXON, BBC1
(Ken Moxham)

"Genetically, [Amir] Khan looks a lot bigger than [Daniel] Thorpe."

DUKE McKENZIE, ITV
(Robert Galgut)

"He's gone down like he's been felled by a tree."

ANDY GRAY
(Lee Morton)

"... if you keep looking backwards in football, you'll fall flat on your face."

NICKY BUTT
(John Boley)

"Oh, stop moaning! When was the last time it snowed on Christmas Eve?"

Sour note

Sir,

As an inner-city comprehensive music teacher, I find myself still smarting from the unwelcome and ill-informed cadence to Lunchtime O' Boulez's piece on black ethnic minorities in orchestras (1146).

The National Curriculum is not without its faults. But at least it does provide an opportunity to deliver education on a wide range of musical styles, genres and cultures, including classical, rap and rock music, incorporating listening, composing and performing.

Given the choice, I'd rather keep my students (from a variety of ethnic backgrounds) engaged with something culturally relevant to them than repeat the dry and pointless grounding in classical music that passed for my state education.

Private Eye remains my favourite organ in the war against injustice, corruption and high-level incompetence. But us foot soldiers work hard to keep our students motivated and we do not appreciate being shot in the back by elitist snobs such as your music correspondent.

Regards,
DAN BARROW,

London.

Best effort

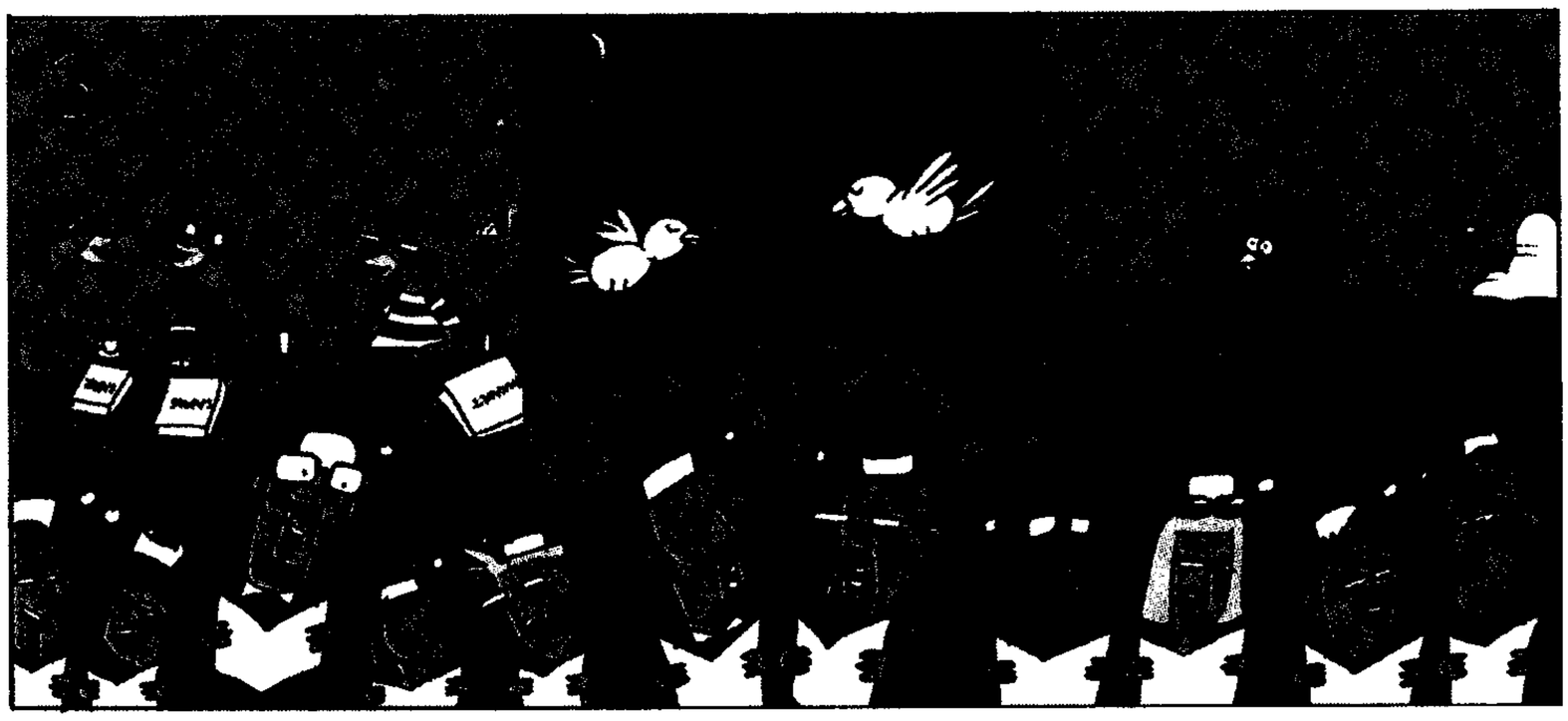
Sir,

By George, it was good to see Hackwatch castigating Fleet Street for its overreaction to the Belfast Boyo's death. Heartening to see that the Eye's restrained response restricted itself, in one form or another, to just about every page in Eye 1147.

PETER WYTON,

Gloucester.

TWELVE GRIM DAYS OF CHRISTMAS KNIFE & PACKER



NOOKS and CORNERS

LAMPING the Ceausescu-style clearance policies of Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, Lambeth Borough Council is about to demolish 52-74 and 75-91 St Agnes Place – perfectly decent Late Victorian terraces next to Kennington Park which are in reasonable condition and quite capable of rehabilitation. The council wants these houses down as they have been occupied by squatters for some 30 years; and two weeks ago the squatters were evicted, one of their number being hospitalised.

Lambeth owns these houses, and all it now has to do is grant itself planning permission to demolish them, resulting in a cleared site which will be handed to a housing association (though there are no plans for replacement buildings). So much for sustainable development; so much for respecting the "embodied energy" in these eminently re-usable structures; so much for not wasting council taxpayers' money.

The only opposition to this gratuitous vandalism is SAVE Britain's Heritage, which points out that Lambeth's own Unitary Development Plan (Policy MD069) recommends the retention of these very buildings. But history repeats itself. Back in 1977 Lambeth council deliberately damaged and then demolished other empty houses in St Agnes Place which had been squatted. A large mobile crane went down the street with a ball and chain.

Twenty years before that, the magnificent church of St Agnes Kennington Park (after which the street is named) which had been damaged in the Blitz but which was reparable, was demolished by the diocese of Southwark – despite the protests of John Betjeman, the sainted founder of this column. Poor St Agnes, to be associated with such regular vandalism and stupidity. But hooray for SAVE.

WHAT is going on at South Kensington Station? Readers will recall that a massive development over the tracks by Stanhope plc in collaboration with Hutchinson Whampoa, designed by Terry Farrell & Partners, was much criticised by local residents, English Heritage and officers of the borough of Kensington & Chelsea, and was subsequently withdrawn (Eye 1096).

The proposals were, however, supported by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). The chairman of Stanhope is Sir Stuart Lipton who, as it happened, was then also chairman of CABE; indeed, the South Kensington case was one of those considered in the conflict of interest audit into CABE that led to Lipton's resignation as chairman (Eyes passim).

Now Lipton has bounced back and earlier this year presented new proposals which responded to the inconvenient fact that South Kensington Station was listed in August 2004 – even though the merits of the Edwardian shopping arcade and other buildings by George Sherrin there had been rubbished by Lipton's historic buildings adviser, Professor Robert Tavernor (a computer literate smoothie from the University of Bath who is set to succeed Anthony Blee in this comfortable role). The justification for the original development was to generate income to improve the station; but now London Underground Limited [LUL] no longer requires the Circle Line station to be decked over, nor a new booking hall at ground level.

The latest Farrell design involved other architects (who had all emerged from the Farrell office) and, at a meeting on 17 November, Sir Stuart claimed that the proposal was new, was conservation led, and that, curiously, the height of the seven-storey block of flats between Thurloe Square and Pelham Street was a requirement of English Heritage.

In fact the latest proposals were essentially a rehash of a scheme offered in 1999 and it involved a new commercial building on top of the station and the demolition of the (long neglected) 19th century buildings along Thurloe Street. And then, dramatically (and wisely), Sir Terry Farrell withdrew from the project just before a meeting with planners on 24 November. The Farrell office felt it was "somehow being undermined". Perhaps Sir Terry got wind of the fact that, in a strategy report issued in June 2004, Stanhope considered it "appropriate to address the issue of the architect and select a new architect".

Perhaps now is the time for LUL to think again and consider the proposals from the Brompton Association in a report entitled South Kensington: The way forward. This argues that a large commercial development on the station site is no longer necessary or desirable, and that refurbishment of the existing buildings combined with more modest development along Pelham Street – where shops stood until cleared in the 1970s – would be enough to fund necessary improvements at the underground. "Outdated ideas die hard, particularly if they presage huge development profits." Quite.

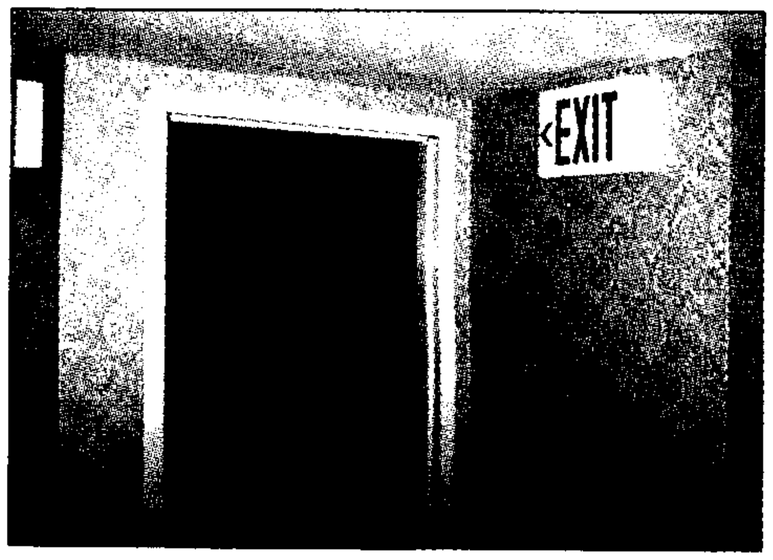
Sir Stuart Lipton's role in all this is puzzling – especially as he has announced that he is to sell all his shares in Stanhope plc. These developers – pace claims by Lipton - no longer have a contract with LUL, so why are they continuing to lobby for an unwanted project? Could it be pride? Could it be that, because he failed to get his own way over South Kensington Station despite his carefully fostered local connections (what with one director of Stanhope, Oliver Stocken, on the board of trustees of the Natural History Museum, for instance, and another, Peter Rogers, brother of The Ennobled Architect, at the V&A), Sir Stuart is just plain piqued?

'Piloti'

YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH

I-SPY *Las Vegas*



Submitted by Mike Bolton.
£10 paid for similar submissions. *(SAE required for return of photographs)*

MUSIC AND MUSICIANS

THERE was a time when music critics had a certain stature. They were grand, imperious, aloof; but generally they got away with it because they knew their stuff and wrote with an authority that even their worst enemies acknowledged.

These days, things are different and there was a spectacular example of own-goal ignorance in the Observer the other week that shouldn't be allowed to pass without comment. It came from the pen of the esteemed Anthony Holden, whose chief credentials as a music critic are (a) that he was a royal biographer (b) that he's a friend of the editor, and (c) er, that he was royal biographer (they *so* love music at the Palace).

Holden was dispatched to write about a London Sinfonietta concert full of hard stuff that was obviously way off his radar. Not that he was ready to admit it. In the course of his review he made a snottily dismissive comment on his fellow-listeners. 'Any doubts', he wrote, 'about the pseud-heavy proportion of the audience in a sparsely-filled QEH were dispelled when it applauded half-way through a crystalline rendering of Webern's Five Orchestral Pieces, the only work of the evening it might have been expected to know'.

Unfortunately for Holden, the audience knew the work rather better than he did. Webern's Five Orchestral Pieces last collectively five minutes. At the end of those five minutes the audience applauded, entirely appropriately. In response to the applause, the Sinfonietta played the Pieces again. After which the audience applauded a second time.

Holden's grasp of this music was so vague that he couldn't distinguish between when it was half-through and when it was over. Nor, apparently, could his sharp, critical ears discern any familiarity in the same music being played twice over. Nor could he even count the number of Pieces as they unfolded (not difficult when the clue is in the title).

One can only hope that in a future column he'll apologise to that Sinfonietta audience for defaming them, apologise to the Sinfonietta itself for presuming to judge its performance from a position of complete ignorance, and apologise to his readers for any impression he might have given that his reviews could be trusted.

'Lunchtime O'Boulez'

The Hypochondriac
by Moliere
In a new version by Richard Bean
7th December – Due to cast illness, the matinee performance has been cancelled.
Almeida Theatre

Letter from **Kiev**

from Our Own Correspondent

DRESSING up in orange, standing in the freezing cold... everything seemed so much simpler in those heady days under the international spotlight a year ago. Alas, our peaceful revolution has not turned out as we expected.

We had gone out on the streets in support of Victor Yuschenko, our reforming champion, after our pro-Russian mafia under Viktor Yanukovych tried to fix election results and steal the presidency. Imagine our surprise when Yuschenko, installed as leader and with the power of the people behind him, dumped as prime minister the gorgeous, pouting Yulia Tymoshenko in favour of... Yanukovych!

Magnanimous in victory, Yuschenko went on to sign a "memorandum" granting amnesty to the goons who'd been stuffing ballot boxes last year – and then himself promised never to commit electoral fraud. It is a bit like Churchill in 1944 promising Hitler he wouldn't invade Poland.

Yushchenko has been ever so busy, too busy, indeed, to find out who poisoned him and turned his face into a pock-marked pickle before the elections. He still has more than 1,000 times the normal level of dioxin in his blood. Nor are we any closer to justice for the people who beheaded the dissident journalist Georgiy Gongazde in 2002 – even though we have all heard the voice of former president, Leonid Kuchma, on a secret tape-recording ordering the murder.

Generosity has its limits, though. Our new government took back the steel mill sold off for €670m in 2004 to such business luminaries as, er, Viktor Pinchuk, the son-in-law of the then president, and resold it in October for the rather more realistic price of $4bn. The new buyer was none other than Lakshmi Mittal, the Indian tycoon who seems to know a thing or two about how to deal with places as far removed as Britain and Nigeria. It was certainly a fairer tender than the earlier bid, and Mittal's money ought to help our otherwise cash-strapped government keep our wretched pensioners afloat a bit longer.

Unfortunately for our old folk, our former friends across the eastern border also have their eyes on the cash. We rely heavily for energy on Russian gas, which we get for about a third of the market rate in return for letting them pipe the stuff across Ukraine. Now the Russian gas company Gazprom wants to raise the price to market levels. It's just one more way our cousins remind us whose nuts are in whose paws. If our leaders keep their nerve, we can simply tell them we'll triple our transit fees in return.

Back in Moscow, the Orange Revolution seems to have prompted something of a rethink in strategy. Then, they backed the clearly pro-Russian tendency (Yanukovych and Kuchma) against their freedom-loving opponents. Now Russia is backing everyone – or at least trying to. Previously Ms Tymoshenko was menaced with charges of bribing Russian officials, but those charges have now been dropped. In return, Tymoshenko has been heard praising the charming Mr Putin on Russian radio. The new Moscow-friendly stance will not do her any harm in the elections in March. During the revolution voters in the pro-Russian industrial cities of the east viewed her as a harridan and patsy of the West. If she can corner some of that market, she seems likely to return in March.

The bigger problem is where Ukraine's future lies. Most of us have seen little improvement in our miserable lot since the revolution. Salaries and pensions remain low as prices rise. The revolution seemed to offer a quick route to the EU, which many of us see as a shortcut to prosperity. But Brussels is offering nothing more than encouraging rhetoric, and the same goes for NATO. If the West doesn't want Ukraine...

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

● "Ai Ai started smoking in 1989," a zookeeper at Qinling Safari Park told reporters in Shaanxi Province, "just after her first husband Jian Jian died. She began picking up cigarette butts that had been discarded by visitors, we started relighting them for her, and before long she'd developed a five a day habit. If we didn't co-operate, she used to complain, and because chimpanzees can be very noisy when they're angry, we started buying her a regular supply, to keep her quiet.

"Her habit got much worse after 1997, when her second husband Da Hu passed away, and one of her offspring was taken away to another zoo. To dispel her loneliness, she started to rely much more heavily on cigarettes, and she was soon up to twenty a day. But earlier this summer, she developed a nasty cough and we became concerned about her health, so the management decided it was time to help her quit.

"At first it wasn't easy. She squealed for cigarettes, but we diverted her attention with walks, music sessions, food, and a gym workout, and after about four weeks she stopped begging for tobacco. She now has fried dishes and dumplings at every meal, alongside her regular diet of milk, bananas, and rice. And I've also lent her my Walkman, so she can put earphones on and enjoy some pop music. I'd say she still feels lonely at times, but we're searching across the nation for a new spouse, and maybe she'll be third time lucky." *(China Daily, 5/10/05. Spotter: Colin Garvie)*

– ● –

● *"I'm not sure what the asking price is for a spit sample," Sizwe Kupelo of the Eastern Cape Health Department admitted at a press conference, "but I do know that what's going on is tantamount to fraud. We've uncovered a widespread illegal trade in human spit, which is being produced and sold by villagers in the Qumbu region who are infected with tuberculosis. The spit is bought by healthy people, who then use it to fool the health department into thinking that they too have the disease, so they qualify for state disability grants.*

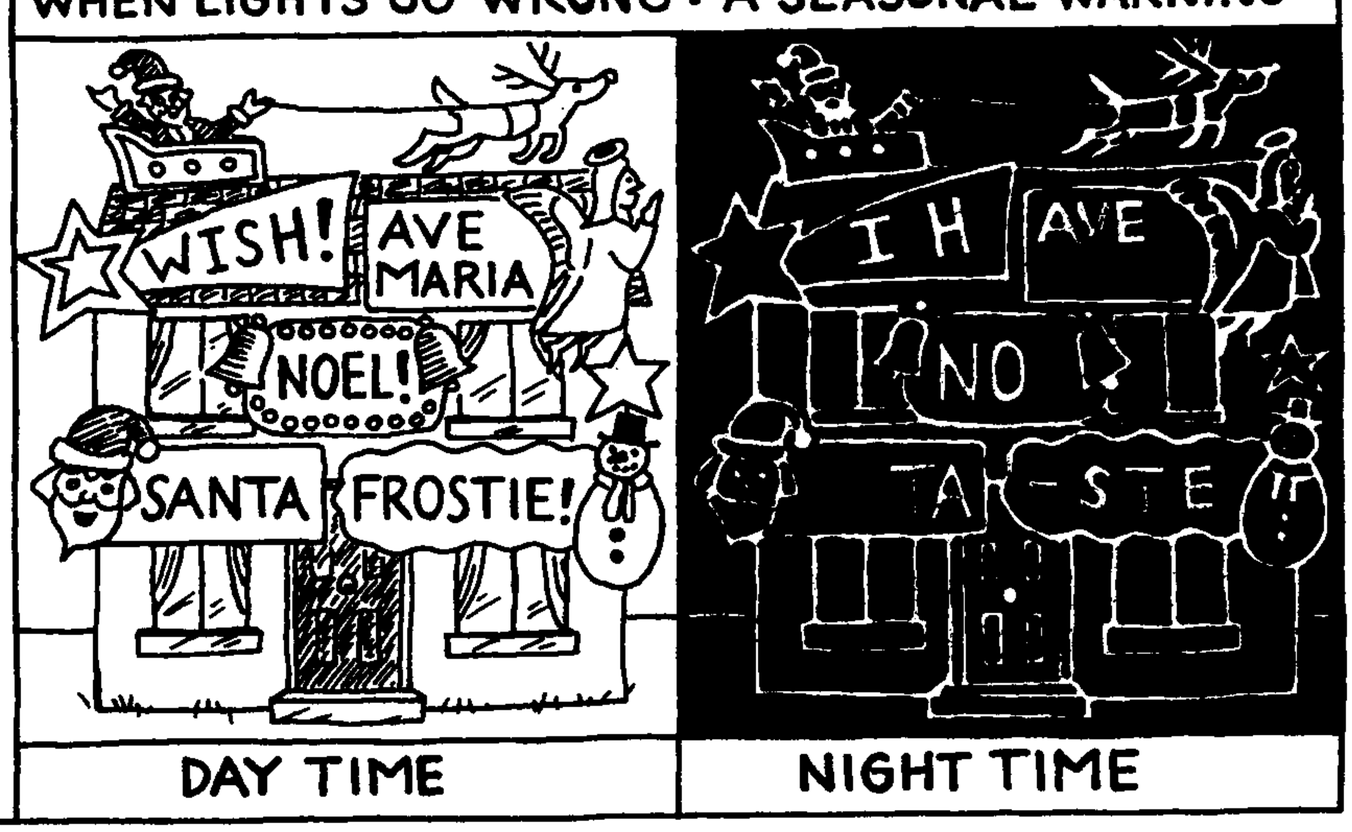
"People may think this is a safe and clever way of obtaining money from the government, but they're wrong. Not only is it illegal, but TB is a highly contagious bacillus, which can easily be transferred by saliva. If a healthy person puts infected spit into their mouth before a swab is taken by a nurse, the chances are that they too will catch TB. People have to stop acting out of ignorance, because they are putting themselves and other villagers at risk in the process." (Daily Dispatch [Zambia], 28/9/05. Spotter: Jenny Allebone)

– ● –

● "When Eriko Kawaguchi first complained to us, we didn't think she was serious," a police spokesman told reporters in Tokyo, "because she was so obviously incriminating herself. She said she wanted us to arrest a private detective named Akio Okudaira, because she'd paid him 1.65 million yen in advance for services that he had then failed to provide. And when we asked what those services were, she happily explained that he'd agreed to murder her boyfriend's wife, but had broken their agreement because, six months later, the woman was still alive.

"She showed us her bank account, and we could see that she had indeed made the payment to Okudaira's agency. And she'd also paid another 1 million yen to Takaharu Tabe, who Okudaira had introduced to her as 'the hitman' who would shoot the other woman. All three are now under arrest. Okudaira and Tabe say they never had any intention of assassinating the woman, they were just trying to get as much money as possible out of Miss Kawaguchi. As for her, she still doesn't seem to realise that conspiracy to murder is a very serious offence. She still thinks she's going to get her money back, and that everything else will be fine." *(Japan Today, 4/10/05. Spotter: Steven Manifould)*

Apparently BY MIKE BARFIELD



ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon)

Hullo!

And a very happy Wintervali to you all!

This is the Season of Renewal, and I know you will all want to know what is my personal resolution for the year which lies ahead!

Well, that's an easy one! Even the children could get that one!

No, Tariq, I am not going to resign. Quite the opposite!

My resolution is that I am going to stay on as your vicar and finish the job!

It's what I call my "legacy".

It's a big word that comes from the Greek "Legassos", something that is completely forgotten.

So don't let anyone tell you that I've come to the end of my time here at St Albion's

Particularly, I would suggest, that moon-faced young man who had the cheek to interrupt my sermon the other say, by shouting out to the entire congregation "you were the future once, but now you're the past it"!

What nonsense! I could easily have come up with some devastating put-down that would have shut him up for good.

But, hey, that's not my style! I thought it would be much more effective if I just stood there with my mouth open and said nothing!

And so it proved! Our young friend was made to look very foolish, as you could see from the way everyone laughed and waved their hymn sheets!

Which reminds me of my other new year's resolution which I've just thought of.

I am not going to waste my time going on about young Mr. Cameron, who is a silly boy who's got nothing better to do than go round the parish drinking cups of tea and smiling at everyone!

How pathetic! He won't get very far doing that, will he?

The answer is "no, he wont", thank you, Sayonara, not "it hasn't done you any harm."

Perhaps Mrs. Kelly could make sure that in future you attend our Special Needs Sunday Club!

Anyway, I expect you all remember that story about the rich young man in the Bible who wanted to do good in the world, even though he'd been to Eton!

And what was he told? He was told, politely but firmly, to go away and leave that kind of thing to those who really know what they are doing!

And that young man went away sadly, and was never heard of again!

And, my goodness me, isn't there a lesson there for certain soppy young men in this parish today?

I don't want to go on about him, but really! Why does he have to bring his wife into everything all the time, cuddling up to her whenever there's anyone with a camera phone nearby?

As I said to Cherie, this is not the kind of thing she and I would do!

In fact she's given me a quote for this newsletter, which I am delighted to put in.

This is what she said: *"If you need a last-minute Christmas present idea, why not purchase a copy of "I am a goldfish: Life inside The Vicarage" by Cherie Booth and Melvina Barg. £12.99. Three-for-the-price-of-one at Waterstone's."*

Thank you, Cherie!

Which brings me to my sixth and final point, as we go forward into 2006.

I have absolutely no plans to retire. But, when I do, I have no wish whatever just to slink away to the St Albion's Sunset Home for Rich Friends of The Vicar, and sit there reminiscing about how much better things used to be when I was the vicar instead of Mr. Brown, or rather more likely that soppy boy whose name I'm never going to mention again.

A Happy Chinese New Year to you all.

(Year of the Vicar!)

Tony

Thanks!!!

Thanks for nothing to Mr Blunkett who is telling everyone that I've got it wrong about my plans to turn St Albion's Infant School into the Kwik-Fit Beacon Academy. Well, I've learnt one lesson already and that's not to expect gratitude from someone whose career you've saved twice!

No wonder you can't find anyone to have your babies, David, when you treat your closest friend so shabbily!

Shame on you, David, and Happy Christmas! T.B.

— Valete —

It's goodbye to Mr Birt who has occupied the office in the vicarage attic for the last few years. As you know, Mr Birt has been busy doing "Blue Sky Thinking".

And what he has been thinking is that he would like to earn a great deal of money! So he has decided to join local millionaire Mr Guy Handout in his exciting company Terra Firma. So you see, Mr Birt has gone from "Blue Sky" to "Terra Firma" and now his feet are *firmly* **on the ground!!**

We wish him well and would like to thank him for all his "input" (great word, John!), which has turned the Parish into a thriving resource module rolled out across all the parameters of the outsourced intranet market paradigm. Is that right, John? Tony Blair.

A Christmas Prayer

To remember in your prayers: Mr. Kennedy Moderator of the United Reformed Liberal Democrat Church.

Mr. Kennedy is under a great deal of pressure from his congregation and is being urged to stand down and give way to a better qualified older man. It is always sad when a church leader loses the confidence of his flock and let us all pray that Mr. Kennedy sets an example to us all by staying on even though he is obviously ill equipped to do the job with which he has been entrusted - probably because of a weakness for all things scotch if you know what I mean! Cheers!

Amen T.B.

PUBLIC NOTICE

We hereby publish the Banns of Gay Marriage between Peter, a spin-ster of this parish (!) now of Le Quartier des Matelots, Bruxelles and Rinaldo formerly a bachelor of the Parish of Los Amigos de Dorothea, Rio de Janeiro. This is for the 49th time of asking so get on with it Peter!!

If anyone know of any just cause or impediment why these two may not be joined in Civil Partnership they are to keep quiet about it because Mr. Mandelson is a personal friend of the Vicar. Ok? TB

Thought For The Day

We hear a lot about '"Free speech" don't we but there are limits as there are to everything in life. There is a limit to how fast we can go in our cars, a limit to how long you can park in the church car park and a limit to my patience with silly women who stand outside the vicarage gate reading out the names of people for whose deaths I am mysteriously responsible!!

Well what would you do if someone did that to you in the middle of the night – or day as it was in this case? Obviously you would call the police and get Maya Evans put in prison as a terrorist which is clearly what she is.

So let's hear no more about "freedom of speech". What about "freedom from deranged women reading out names of dead people?"

That's surely a more important freedom. Isn't it? T.B.

SODOM & GOMORRAH 'New Era Dawns'

by Our Man in the Cities of the Plain

DEFYING the fire and brimstone which for so long has plagued them, Sodomites and Gomorrahns turned out in their thousands today to elect a new parliament.

For the first time, Sodomites, who have previously boycotted electoral procedures, took part in the election – a move described by a Gomorrahn spokesman as "a great step forward".

"Our twin communities," he said, "can now go forward into a new era."

Weather

A severe weather warning was issued today. Heavier falls of brimstone are expected and widespread fires will break out this evening.

KENNEDY NOT DEAD

by Our Assassination Staff

Lemsip Obit

THE WORLD was in shock yesterday as the news came through that Charles Kennedy had not been assassinated. The Liberal Democrat leader was alive and well.

"I couldn't believe it," said one observer standing on a grassy knoll, Mr Menzies Campbell. "Why isn't he dead?"

Conspiracy theorists are already piecing together the reasons why Kennedy is still with us.

"It could be that there's no one else," said one. "He's the only Lib Dem anyone's ever heard of," said another.

Mr Kennedy was keen to reassure supporters that he was in good health.

"Your good health!" he shouted, as he toasted himself *(cont. p. 94)*

On Other Pages

Where were you when you heard the news that Kennedy was dead drunk? **4**

POETRY CORNER

Lines on the retirement of Sir Trevor McDonald veteran newsreader

So. Farewell
Then Sir Trevor
McDonald.

BONG!

You are retiring
After many years
Of newsreading.

BONG!

Join us again
After the break.

BONG!

Or possibly not.

E.J. Thribb (17½)

SOAP UPDATE
What You Will See

Neighbours BBC1

(Australian suburb)

Bruce: Blimey, Sheila, have you seen who's moved in next door?

Sheila: Strewth Bruce! They look like Abos but I think they're Lebs!

Bruce: Shall we invite them round for a barbie!

Sheila: Yeah! And then throw them on it! Bloody towel-heads!

Theme tune: *"Neighbours, Everybody Hates Their Neighbours, Especially if they come from the Middle East"*

ON OTHER PAGES

Why Britain is to blame for this and everything else **by Germaine Greer 94**

BUSH IPOD CONFUSION

Upmarket Panto presents

STARRING
Dame Judi "RSC" Dench as *DICK*

Kenneth "Hamlet" Branagh as *PUSS*

AND

Sir Benjamin Kingsley as *WISHY-WASHY*

with guest appearances from Melvyn "South Bank Show" Bragg as *WIDOW TWANKY*

PLUS

Music by the Berlin Phil's Sir Simon Rattle with special "BENJAMIN BRITTEN SINGALONG" from Ian Bostridge

PLUS

Ralph Fiennes and Juliet Stevenson as "Daisy" the Pantomime Cow With script by Harold "Nobel Prize" Pinter (additional material by Kazuo "Booker Prize Shortlist" Ishiguru)

LIVE AT ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL!

FUN FOR ALL THE FAMILY!!
(Oh no it isn't!)

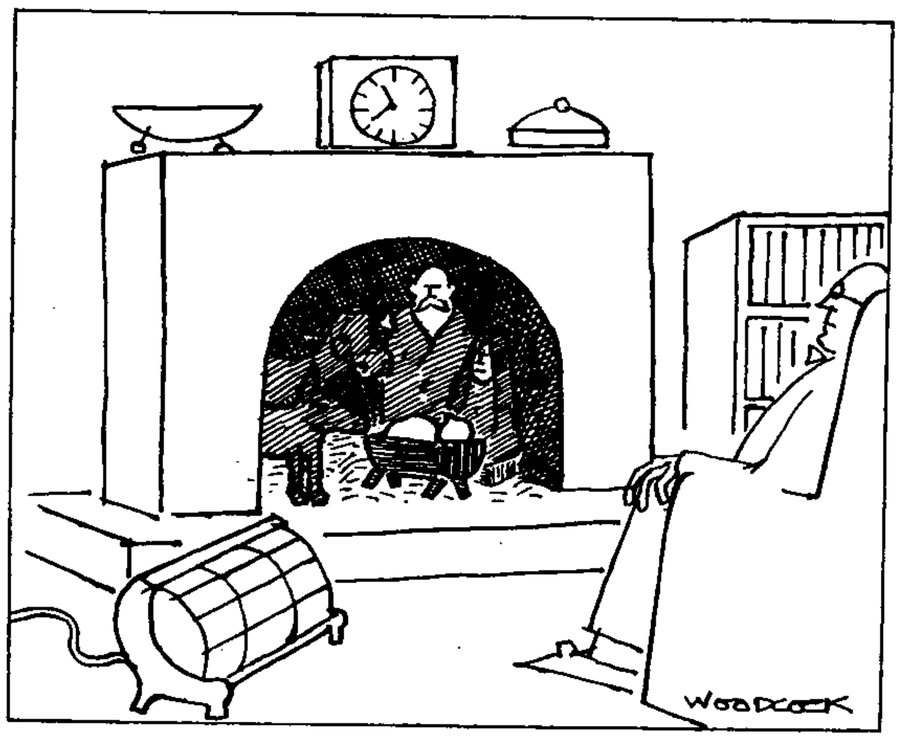
Tickets still available at all prices!

***"A harrowing and deeply felt examination of one cat's disillusionment with the human condition"* The Economist**

"Typical – buy them loads of expensive presents, and what do they do? Create an art installation with the boxes"

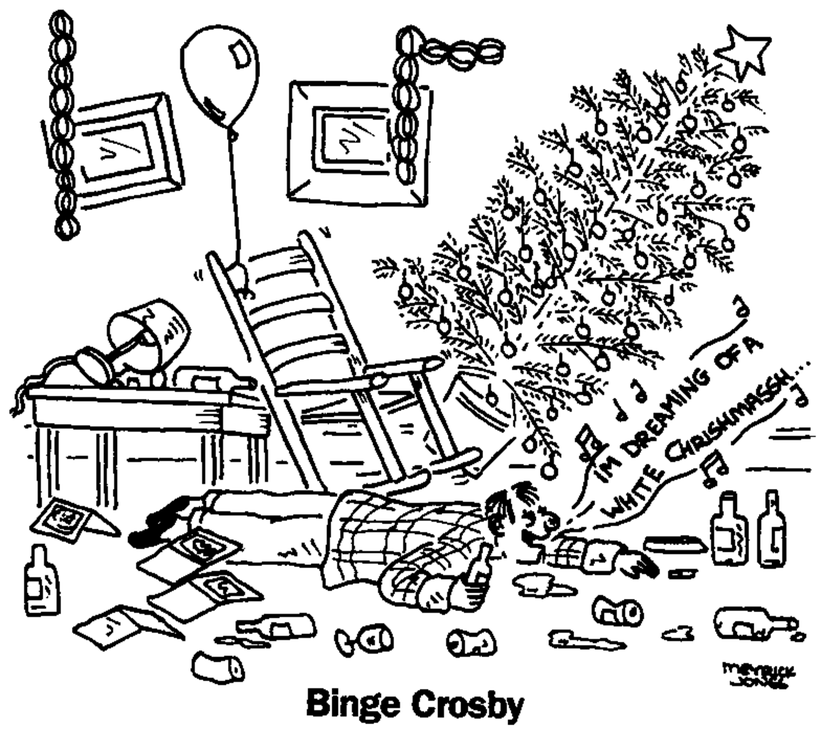
"Westward leading, still proceeding…"

"Actually, you have caught us at a rather bad time…"



"Yule blog, anyone?"

"Your father just adores all those TV hospital series"



Binge Crosby

POLICE LOG

Neasden Central Police Station

Office hours: 9-12 Mon-Tues (except Tuesday)

December 10 2005

7.30am Report to canteen for breakfast. The following items were consumed:1 so-called 'Neasden Sizzler' consisting of: egg, bacon, sausage, fried bread, beans, black pudding.

The bacon and sausage were optional items with regard to officers of Jewish, Muslim or similar faith orientation, and the black pudding was renamed 'Non-White Pudding' to avoid giving offence to any officers of Afro-Caribbean origin (none).

9.00am Report received that a Mrs Jenny Cardigan had committed a very serious homophobic offence on 'Good Morning Neasden', a local radio station, when she stated in the course of a phone-in interview that in her view many gay men liked Shirley Bassey.

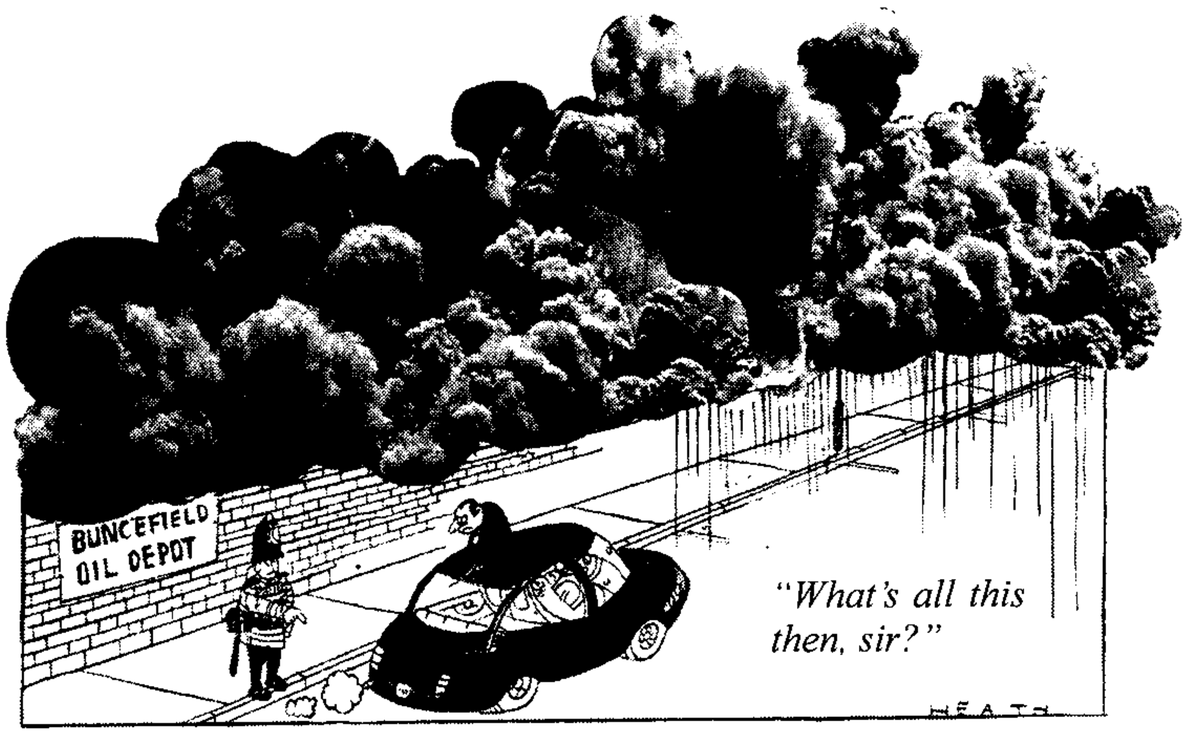
An armed response unit was immediately despatched to Mrs Cardigan's residence at 453 George Melly House, where she was interrogated for seven hours and then cautioned as to her future behaviour.

12.15pm Report received from a Community Support Officer, Ms Dawn Rayde, that while on patrol in the Kofi Annan Shopping Precinct she had observed a gang of uniformed religious extremists playing tubas and singing songs of a highly provocative and offensive nature, such as 'While Shepherds Watched', 'O, Come All Ye Faithful', and 'Silent Night'. The firearms squad was immediately despatched to secure the high street, evacuate the town street and take the terrorist-suspects into custody. The tubas were disposed of by means of a controlled explosion.

5.30pm All officers not otherwise engaged were directed to proceed by vehicular transport in convoy (ie: cars) to Highgrove House, near Tetbury, to interrogate the chief suspect in the murder enquiry relating to Diana, the late Princess of Wales. While proceeding to the interrogation venue via the fast lane of the M94 motorway, a number of other motorists were regrettably killed, owing to the act that we were travelling at 110m.p.h., and the aforementioned drivers were impeding our investigation.

On arrival at the home of the suspect, we were informed by a Mr Alan Fitztightly that His Royal Highness was unfortunately not free to be interviewed, since he was in Scotland opening a halal butcher's shop in Auchtermuchty. On returning to the station, officers opened one Christmas hamper generously provided by a Mr A.L. Fayed of the Harrod's Food Department, containing the following: One smoked red herring, One packet Egyptian Delight, One vintage cheese (Gorgon-fuggin-zola), 12 bottles McFayed's Very Old Three-week Matured Whisky ('a wee dram afore ye drive').

8.45pm Report received of an incident involving serious assault, rape and homicide in the George Best Arms public house (formerly the Rose and Crown) opposite the police station. Female caller was advised by automatic answering machine that no officers were available to attend her, owing to prioritising police time in attending other incidents in the locality (see above). She was further advised that counselling services would be made available to her on pressing the hash button on her keypad.



MURDOCH GUILTY

by Our Media Staff
Stephen Gloverat

DESCRIBED as a ruthless psychopathic loner, obsessed with sex and violence, Rupert Murdoch was an Australian drifter who moved from continent to continent, ambushing innocent newspapers, then leaving them for dead.

Murdoch delighted in finding pretty young girls, stripping off their clothes and then *(cont'd. p.3)*.

From the Gnome DVD collections

The Must-Have Christmas Treat for Cricket Lovers

The Highlights of the 2005 England Tour of Pakistan

7 continuous hours of blank screen as you enjoy the very best of that historic series of defeats and failures.

Thrill again to nothing much! Relive the magic moment when you turned the television off and watched "GMTV" instead!

- BONUS FEATURES: None
- EXTRAS: Hundreds because our fielding is not very good.

OUT NOW –
LIKE MICHAEL VAUGHAN!

Price: £1999.99p

The Daily Bible

David Floors Goliath with 'Consensus' Tactic

by Our Political Correspondent **Andrew Myrrh**

THE Philistines were reeling last night as new kid on the block David took on their champion and defeated him by agreeing with everything he said.

Goliar

The Philistines were furious at this change in strategy by their opponents' young champion. Said one: "We were expecting him to attack Goliath head-on like all the others have done. It is unfair of him to stand there talking about an end to sling-and-rock politics."

Pundits were, however, unanimous that this was a death blow for the former giant,

Tony Goliar.

"He's finished. David is the future and he's the one who will lead us to the Promised Land."

THE new shadow spokesman on Higher Education writes on the challenges facing the Tertiary Sector in the light of the forthcoming White Paper.

CRIPES! Double Cripes! and Cripes with knobs on! Good old Spliffy Cameron gave me a job after all! Which between you and me rather saved yours truly's bacon because Mr Brillo gave me the old heave-ho as editor of the Beano! Ooh-er!!

So now I've got to bone up on all this brainbox stuff! Higher Education eh? Blimey! That's a tough one, trying to get your noodle round all that! OK, here's my policy. Shooting straight from the hip – why doesn't everyone go to Eton and then on to jolly old Oxford for a spot of getting hog-whimpering drunk down at the Bullingdon Club!!

If it worked for me and Spliffy – why not for everyone else?! Capital idea says I! Cripes! Downing Street here I come!

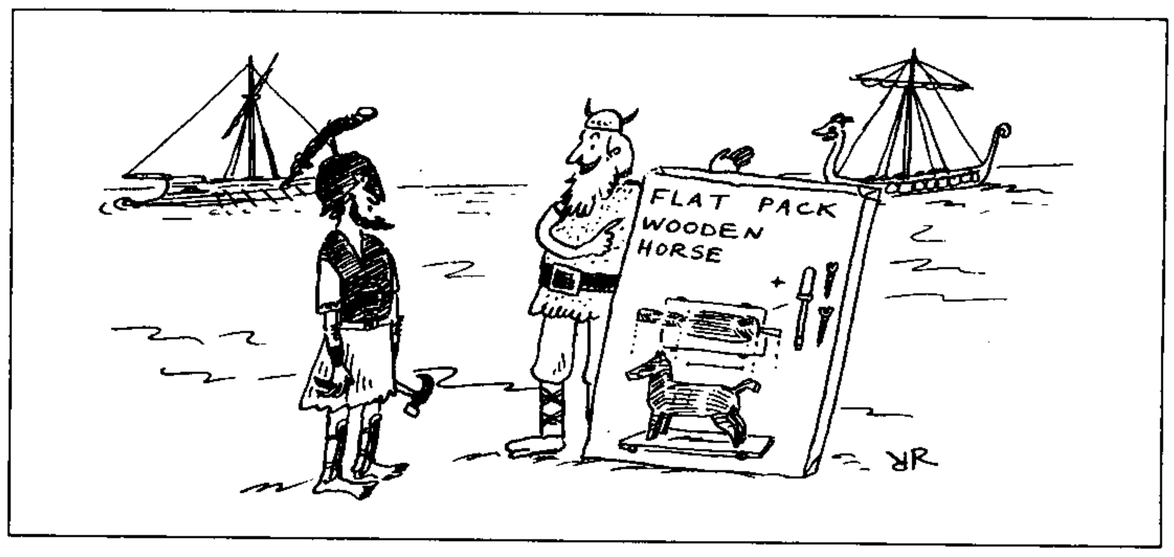
Chortle, chortle!

© Boris The Menace 2005

Christmas Films
Ones to watch

★Terminator Four
Christmas Day BBC1 2.00pm

BIG ARNIE returns – this time as Governor of the State of California. His mission – to execute a gangland murderer from the distant past. And nobody is getting in his way, least of all the namby pamby liberal girlie-men protesting outside the prison. Thrill to his catchphrases "Hasta La Vista, Tookie" and "You Von't be back", as he gives his own career a lethal injection.



Is Nothing Sacred?

asks Britain's leading historian ANDREW ROBERTS

Now I've heard it all. They are going to remake the wartime classic 'They Flew To Bruges'.

I say this. This is sacrilege!

If anything has defined what it means to be British down the centuries then it is this black and white masterpiece which celebrates the men who took part in the most courageous single mission of World War Two – the famous flight to Bruges.

And who could possibly hope to match the unforgettable portrayal of Squadron-Leader Huffington 'Huffy' Buffington by the young John Mills, then at the height of his powers?

Who could equal the young David Tomlinson as Pilot Officer Rollo Rollington?

Or, for that matter, the young Dickie Attenborough as the cheeky daredevil tail-gunner, 'Chalky' Chappie?

They must be stark raving bonkers to think for one minute that they could match the film's now legendary theme tune, the celebrated 'Bruges March', composed by Sir Horace Willmot and later played at the Duke of

Gloucester's funeral.

How dare these vandals set out to destroy such an incomparable work of British genius?

Can you imagine the Italians setting fire to the Sistine Chapel, or the French deciding to bulldoze the Eiffel Tower?

Every living patriotic Brit should rise up and say to these Hollywood hooligans – oi, Mr. Film-men, no!

© *Sir Harold Enfield 2005*

On other pages

- Did Bruges Mission Even Take Place? *asks Corelli Barnett,* **10.**
- Should Bruges 'Heroes' Be Tried For War Crimes? *asks Polly Toynbee,* **14.**
- I Always Hated The Film, *says A.N.Wilson,* **36.**

HUSBAND
I've just heard some bad news kids
SANTAS Grotto
Santa's been killed, trampled by his own reindeers
Shit, is that true?!
SANTAS GROTTO

HOW HEADLINES WORK

Monday

TORIES AHEAD IN POLLS

Tuesday

LADY THATCHER FAINTS AND IS TAKEN TO HOSPITAL

BIG RON – IS IT THE END? 'I Blame Media'

by **E.I. Addio**, Our Man In A&E With A Black Eye And A Missing Tooth

THE WORLD of soccer was rocked to its foundations last night when veteran soccer manager Ron Knee, 59, "lost it" as he was questioned by the media (E.I. Addio, Chief Sports Reporter, Neasden Echo).

When I asked Neasden's tight-lipped mastermind why his team was languishing 50 points adrift at the foot of the North Circular League, the ashen-faced supremo hit out at the media, claiming that "You people are to blame for reporting our defeats in a negative way."

ZERO INTOLERANCE

At this point, the 59-year-old supremo hit out at myself, planting his fist into my face.

"This interview is terminated!" he said as I lost consciousness.

Inevitably, this incident raised serious question-marks over Big Ron's future at Neasdenbridge. His former achievements cannot be denied. No one else could have kept the Squirrels at the bottom of the league for so many years.

But last night Neasden fans (Sid and Doris Bonkers) said, "We back Big Ron 100 per cent. Otherwise he will come round and thump us as well."

Ron Knee is 59.

Late News – England favoured in World Cup draw

Group 94

England
The Gilbert & Sullivan Islands
Tibet
Asbonia (formerly the Soviet Republic of Asbostan)

Said Sven-Goran Eriksson last night: "I am very pleased. I really fancy my chances with this new secretary who has come to work at the FA. I really want to score before too long."

What You Will Switch Off This Christmas!

Radio Three presents its 3 month 'Bach-a-thon', the entire works of Johann Sebastian Barking *(is this right? J. Abramsky-Korsakov)*

Christmas Holiday Tuesday

9am *The Christmas Eve Oratorio*, performed by the Orchestra of the European Enlargement, conducted by Jose Manel Barroso.

10.30 *Cantata No.94, Mein Gott Vorsprung Durch Technik*, sung by the Ambrosia Cream Rice Singers accompanied by the Orchestre Glockenspiel of Cracow.

11.00 *Sonata in A*, for Unaccompanied Treble Recorder, BMW 303, soloist: Yoku Tsanami.

12.00 News and weather from Leipzig.

12.05 *St Matthew Parris*, live from Dusseldorf. Orchestra of the Age of Consent with the State Homophobic Chorus.

3.00 Organ Recital from the Cathedral of St Brillo, Padstow. Choral Prelude: *Ich bin ein Classiches FM Lisztner*; Toccata and Fugger: arr. M. Fayed *(cont'd 94 kHz)*.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Names of the year

From the Rev. Harold Potter.

Sir, As is customary at this time of year, I have compiled a list of the most popular names given to boys and girls, as recorded in your births column:

	Boys	Girls
1.	Sudoku	Sudoku
2.	Asbo	Narnia
3.	Cameron	Condoleezza
4.	Ayad Allawi	Yasmin Alibhai
5.	Flintoff	Ofili
6.	Ryanair	Katrina
7.	Ottakar	Botox
8.	Voldermort	Vettriana
9.	Aslan	Ulay
10.	Avian	Flu

THE REV. HARRY POTTER,
The Vicarage, St. Hogwarts, Beds.

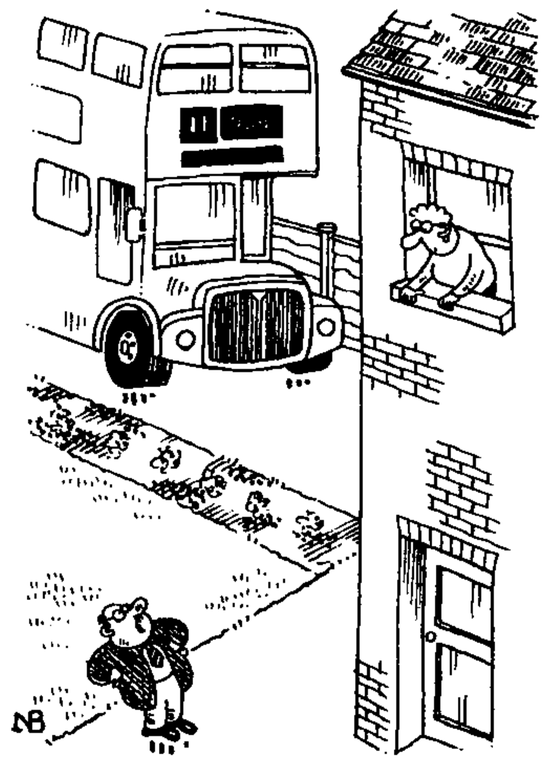
WORD WATCHING

Philip Howard

CELLOTAPH (noun): a large pile of flowers wrapped in cellophane, often with handwritten tributes attached, to mark the death of a public figure whom one has not met (e.g. from BBC News 24, 2005, "*I am standing here in Belfast next to the cellotaph which stretches from here to Stormont*").

BLEARS (verb): portmanteau word, combining 'bleary', 'blur', 'Blair' and 'liar', to describe method used by ministers to confuse the public (e.g. "*That awful woman blears on and on and on*" ITN News Extra 2005).

COMPASSIONATE (adjective): used to describe young ambitious politicians who stop at nothing to achieve their ends (e.g. "*David is ruthlessly compassionate.*" Sky Round-up, 2005).



"I've got your Christmas present"

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam
The Routemaster bus

So. Farewell then
The Routemaster bus.

For 51 years
The supreme symbol of
London throughout
The world –
But now sadly axed
In favour of the so-called
Bendy bus.

"Hold tight please."
"Room for two more on top."
"Next stop Chelsea
Town Hall."

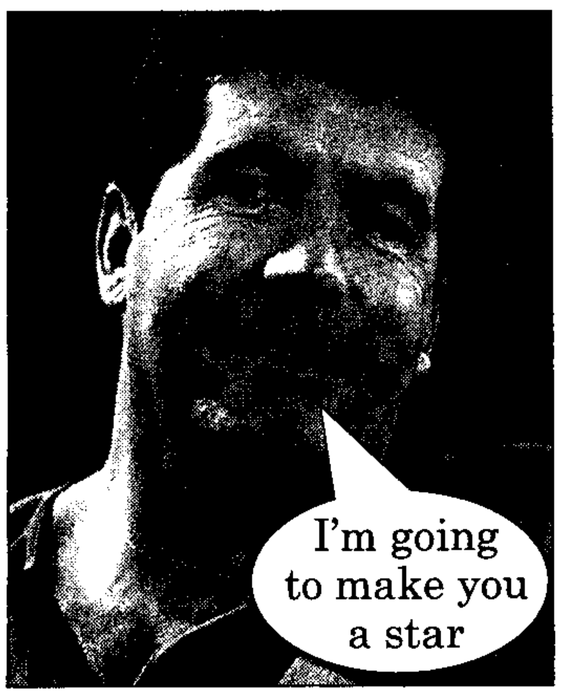
Yes, those were
Your catchphrases.

Farewell, farewell, farewell.
"Any more farewells
Please?"

E.J. Thribb (Number 17½)

E.J. Thribb will be signing his latest anthology of poems *A Garland for Global Warming* at the Poetry Bookshop, Wisbech at 9.30am on Christmas Day.

X FACTOR VOTE FRAUDSTER REVEALED



New Old Sayings

"There's nowt so straight as Robbie Williams"

Traditional Yorkshire Folk Wisdom
first recorded 2005

Football legend best dead

Reuters,London

Bangladesh Daily Star online

Exclusive to all newspapers

Yes, It's Cameron-mania!!

by Our Political Staff GLENDA SLAGG

NOT SINCE the days of the Fab Four has Britain seen anything like it!!!

The whole country has literally gone Cameron crazy over this sexy super-Tory in a suit, who's not afraid to strip off his tie and show us what he's really made of! *(Keep going. Ed.)*

Camer-lot

No wonder the bookies are laying odds of 100 to 1 *on* that Dishy Dave will be Britain's next PM, as tottering Tony limps off into the sunset.

Not since a young John F. Kennedy stormed into Number Ten has politics seen anything like what they are calling "the Cameron effect"!

Digital Cameron

With his boyish good looks, his modern shirts and compassionate cycle helmet, it's no wonder that, in a recent poll commissioned by YouGove, more than 100 percent of Britain's voters said that they would never vote for anyone but dashing Dave ever again.

But with the Tories' new super-leader it's by no means a one-man band.

Dave has assembled around him a galaxy of astonishing talent. Everyone who is anyone is in the Cameronista 1st XI. And they're hot, hot, hot!!!

Just look at these names:

● **Jonathan Starborgling**, 27, Old Etonian son of the 14th Earl of Starborgling. Has known Dave since they were at the exclusive St Cake's Prep School together in the early 1990s. Now becomes chief Tory spokesman on fish.

● **Tabitha McTwittie**, 26, high-flying former television researcher and cousin of David's wife's uncle. Tabitha's role will be to look blonde in newspaper photographs.

● **Zac Fishpaste**, 21, Old Etonian environmentalist and son of the late billionaire financier Sir Jammy Fishpaste. An expert on nuclear wind turbines, he will give much-needed credibility to Cameron's green team.

● **Dave Willetts**, 40, the hyper-intellectual grand old man of the Notting Hill Neocons who will spearhead the intellectual revival of Britain following dynamic Dave's seizure of power. Willetts takes over as spokesman on Regional Centralisation and Low-Energy Lightbulbs.

● **Iain Duncan-Hague**, 51, dynamic, balding former leader, returns to front-line politics to head up an influential behind-the-scenes committee to look into after-dinner speaking *(surely 'social justice'? Ed.)*

Auf Widdecombe, Pet

But don't just look at who's *in* in the the brave new world of the Cameronian High-Fliers.

Just check out the dead wood that Dave has had the guts to chuck on the scrapheap.

● **John Deadwood**, 57, stary-eyed monster of the deep!

● **Malcolm Rifkind**, 86, the political equivalent of a brontosaurus. With his specs and phony Scottish accent, no wonder he's headed for the dustbin of history.

● **Ann Widdecombe**, 65 – fat, weird and not blonde enough for tomorrow's Tories!

Byeeeeeee!

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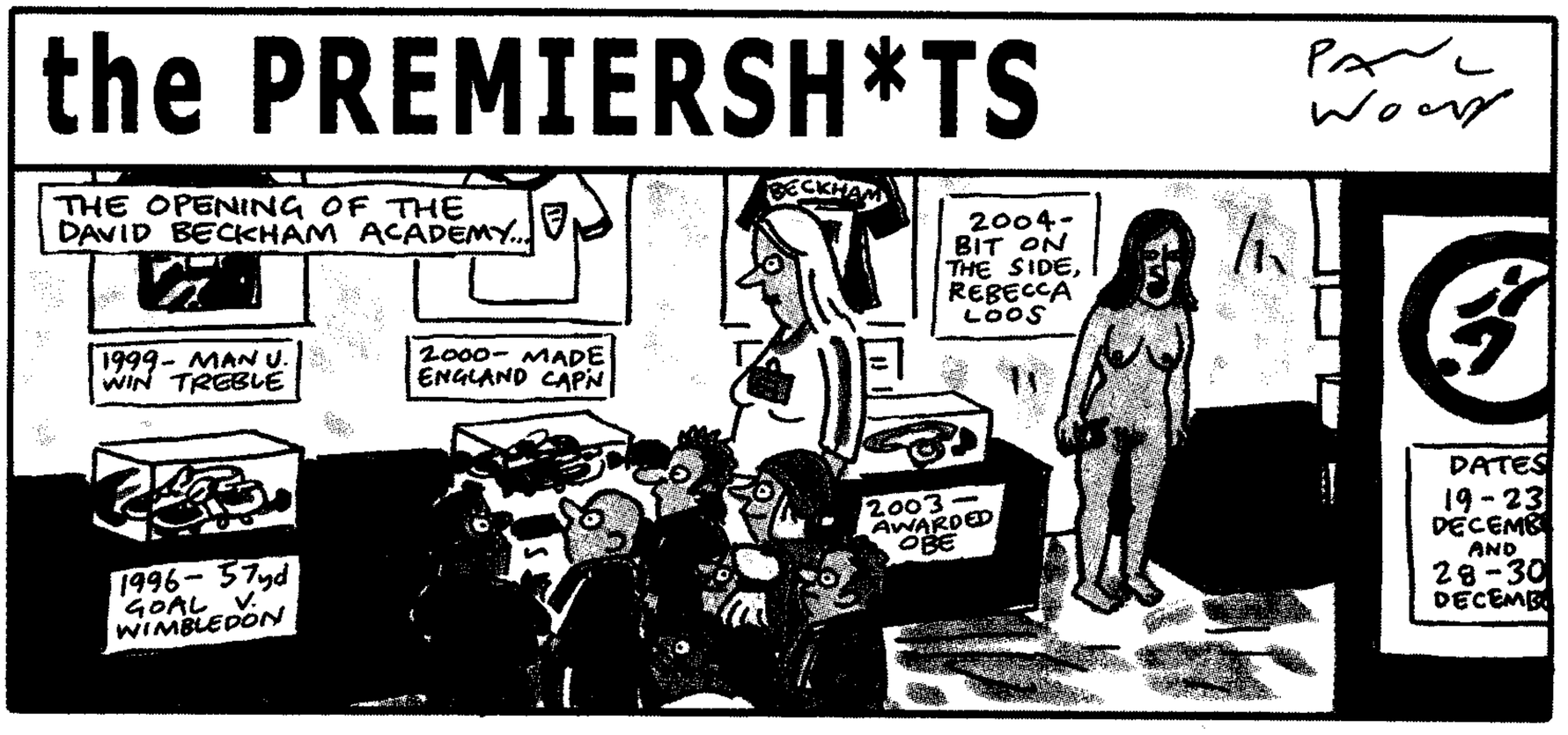

the PREMIERSH*TS
PAUL WOOLF
THE OPENING OF THE DAVID BECKHAM ACADEMY...
1999- MAN U. WIN TREBLE
2000- MADE ENGLAND CAP'N
BECKHAM
2004- BIT ON THE SIDE, REBECCA LOOS
1996- 57yd GOAL V. WIMBLEDON
2003- AWARDED OBE
DATES 19-23 DECEMB AND 28-30 DECEMB

"Father Christmas will know if you have an abortion"

News in Brief

TOXIC DEATH CLOUD TO KILL 'EVERYONE'

IT WAS confirmed today by reporters desperate for a few deaths as a result of the fire at the Buncefield oil refinery that the toxic "death cloud" hanging over South-East England would certainly kill every person living in Britain.

"Meteorologists say the likelihood of the 'toxic death cloud' killing everyone is as high as 0%, so we may as well all end it now to avoid a slow, painful death from the fumes," said all reporters.

LATE IRAN NEWS

OPPOSITION parties in Tehran expressed their concerns today after Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad claimed in a speech that the Nazi holocaust didn't happen.

"Once an elected leader starts making bizarre indefensible comments about Nazis, it can only be a matter of time before he proposes a congestion charge for driving into the centre of town," said a worried *(cont. p. 94)*

STRAW DENIES 'SECRET FLIGHTS ENTERING BRITAIN'

FOREIGN Secretary Jack Straw has told the Commons that to the best of his knowledge no secret flights by Santa have touched down on British rooftops, because Father Christmas has not asked his permission.

A spokesman for Father Christmas said "Ho! Ho! Ho!" before adding that he can't believe that people in this day and age still believe in the existence of Jack Straw.

DIARY

YOKO ONO

My memory of John? Way he always looked at me in the face – he loved me for my beauty and my art – and the way he would say so tenderly, "Yoko, you are indeed a truly tremendous artist whose avant-garde work in a variety of different mediums will be remembered by the world long after the rest of us are forgotten".

John was a prophet. It was as if he could see into the future, to a time when Yoko Ono was performing and exhibiting all over the world, major artist speaking to people of all faiths and races, bringing message of peace to all nations – and putting so much positive effort into keeping alive the name of John Yoko Ono Lennon.

This Christmas, put a mince-pie in the oven for ten minutes. When you remove it, it will be warm. Now place it on your head and pour cream over it.

Yes. You have become a plate.

Slot yourself into the dish-washer, and have a friend turn the dial to FULL WASH.

In an hour's time, you will be clean again.

"War is over if you want it." When John and I first sang those historic words, the Second World War was still fighting and many people were dying. But luckily Churchill and Hitler heard our song on the radio, and they straightaway agreed to lay down their arms and hug one another instead: a great big beautiful hug. It was a lovely tender moment, like the first dewdrop of spring. Thanks, Winston and Adolf, you truly great guys, Yoko so proud of you!

At this time of year, Queen of England often ring me for help. She lovely, lovely woman. But very very frightened.

"Yoko, that you?" she says. "Phew! What a break! Thank God for that! How you today?"

Turns out Queen of England want Yoko Ono's help with her Christmas message to the people of England, UK.

"You wisest human being I ever meet, Yoko" she say. "I truly cherish your fantastic mind, the way you turn everything into poetry, leaving your tiny footprints behind like a little bird lost in the snow. So tell me, Yoko, what the fuck I gonna tell 'em?"

I think for a few minutes. Silence is the door into the soul, just like a biscuit is the perfect accompaniment for a cup of tea.

"You know my song, 'War is over if you want it', Elizabeth?" I ask her, "You sing couple choruses that, you change world forever."

"Hey, great idea, Yoko!" she say. "You total fucking genius!"

Of course, when the time came, she put it into her own words, she go like, "At this very special time of year, I wish you all a blah blah blah," but the inspiration come from her good friend Yoko. She owe me so much, that lady.

Like she always telling me, "I never really like Beatles very much, Yoko. Nor did my husband. No way. He always say Paul his total worst Beatle, John easily best. And what we always say, Yoko, is it's so great they split up leaving you and John to create such fantastic music for the whole world to appreciate. Cheers!"

It's Christmas time. Pretend you are a cracker.

Ask a special friend to pull on your hair. And another special friend to pull on your toes.

Pull, pull, pull!

Eventually, you will split open in the middle. Your stomach will open, and gifts will spill out.

You will have passed away, but your special friends will be very happy with their new surprises.

A Very Happy Christmas and a Yoko New Year, everybody!

Looking back on 2005, there are so many positive things happening in the world, like DNA and stem cells and the Arctic stopping being so freezing, so soon we can all go on holiday there and relax and come back with beautiful tans.

OK, Iraq not so great, but without war we can never find peace, and peace is what we want, isn't it?

And when you turn Iraq around what do you get? Yes – you get Qari! And you know what? John was the leader of The Quarry Men before I changed their name and turned them into historic Beatles! Uncanny! Fantastic! And you turn Yoko round, what you get? Answer: Okoy! And this is my message to the world for 2006: don't worry – everything's gonna be okoy! Look up at the sky, put your head in the sun and your shoulders on the moon. Now let your heart dance.

People always ask me how John and Yoko met. That's the sixty-four-million-dollar question! And until I am offered that amount in the form of contract via my legal representatives I do not answer it in full. Imagine all the people, I tell them, living life as one, purchasing a book each with accompanying CD.

That's one helluva lot of people.

You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one, I have a business manager, and that is one big, big merchandising opportunity. Just think how much peace it will bring the world. What's sixty four million dollars, I ask them, when the future of our fantastic planet is at stake?

But I give you short answer for nothing, as goodwill present from Yoko to her fans, the lovely readers of the humor magazine *Private Eye*. (Yes, it is great to smile).

This is true story, real exclusive. Yoko Ono met John Lennon in Liverpool in 1962, together they formed Beatles. They employed this crap guy Paul McCartney as their bass player for a time – but not for too long, so sorry, Paul, we don't like noise you make, bad vibes too!

Yoko becomes first and only wife of John Lennon, together we form The Beatles and record Sgt Pepper, reaching top of charts worldwide, earning millions and millions of dollars to promote peace throughout the world. What a positive story! And Yoko still lives as the world's leading avant garde artist in New York City, so – yes! – it is a tale with a very positive ending too! Smile, you guys: Yoko lives!

As told to
CRAIG BROWN

Celeb

LIGGER

SORRY ABOUT THE INTERUPTION, LUV..
NO WORRIES, GARY YOU WERE ONLY GONE A MINUTE...
TAPE
...NOW WHERE WERE WE?
YOU WERE ASKING ME ABOUT THE LONGEVITY OF MY CAREER...
TAPE
OH YES. SO GARY, AT YOUR AGE, WHAT MAKES YOU KEEP GOING..?
TAPE
IT'S MY PROSTATE, I'M AFRAID. I'LL BE BACK IN A MOMENT.. GOTTA GO AGAIN...
TAPE

Literary Review

Books of the year

AN exciting new development has occured in the annual 'Books of the Year' charade. Craig Raine, in the pages of the Times Literary Supplement, clearly unsatisfied with the time-honoured practice of puffing one's friends, has taken the hitherto unprecedented step of mixing it with the people who'd given them bad reviews earlier in the season.

First declaring that *Saturday*, by his great chum Ian McEwan, "should have won the Booker Prize", Raine went on to suggest that it was "harmed by two things – envy and envy". Cue a slashing assault on John Banville, who had made the mistake of not liking Ian's darling work in the *New York Review of Books* ("a coarse caricature that couldn't even get the result of the squash game right.") Still sizzling with pique, Raine settled down for a sustained whinge about the poor girl who presumed to review Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* in the *New Yorker* without consulting him first, prior to chucking a gratuitous insult or two at his Oxford colleague Tom Paulin, the methodology of whose *Crusoe's Secret* can apparently "be taken seriously for about fifty seconds". Ouch.

Not quite in the Raine category, but running him dangerously close, were Yasmin Alibhai Brown, who recommended Hanif Kureishi's memoir of his father to readers of the *Independent* on the excellent grounds that it reminded her of a piece of drama she'd written this year about her relationship with her own dad, before going on to praise a collection of essays about freedom of speech, edited by Lisa Appignanesi, in which, inspection later revealed, she just happens to appear herself.

Meanwhile, over in the *New Statesman*, Amanda Craig was anxious to draw attention to her prescience in the McEwan debate. "Long before John Banville's philippic in the *New York Review of Books*, I pointed out how ludicrous the climax was", la Craig righteously deposed "– the idea you could deflate a crazy rapist by reciting 'Dover Beach' when naked is almost as risible as the brain-surgeon hero then operating on his daughter's assailant. If more women had been allowed to review it, this would surely have been spotted earlier."

Amid the clashes of these contending egos, it was a relief to turn to the more traditional pleasures afforded the books page festive round-ups: the detection of the great and good in acts of covert, or not so covert, back-scratching.

The friends of Richard Ingrams were out in force, with A.N. Wilson recommending his *The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett* in the *Evening Standard* and Beryl Bainbridge puffing it in the *Observer*. Dame Beryl is also a pal of Wilson's, so readers of the *Guardian* were treated to a rapt encomium of the latter's *A Jealous Ghost* ("a convincing, compelling and icy reworking of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*.") D.J. Taylor, meanwhile, managed two rounds of applause for his great friends Hilary Mantel and Carol Birch, in the *Independent on Sunday* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, while also contriving to glad-hand his chum Alan Jenkins's collection of poems, *A Shorter Life*. Francis Wheen, meanwhile, chose two books of the year in the *Observer*, Kathryn Hughes's life of Mrs Beeton and Rose Prince's *The new English Kitchen*. This represents a handsome compliment to Fourth Estate, who publish both Hughes and Prince – and, er, Francis Wheen.

Here and there an odd, democratising spirit can be found blowing over the annual "best-ofs", in which persons not conspicuously connected with the world of books are asked for their selections. The results are not remarkably entertaining. In the *Observer*, for example, departing Tory leader Michael Howard went for a book about baseball, while Charles Kennedy's stunningly original choice was for ... the Ian McEwan.

The professional contributors, thankfully, were on hand to remind us of their individual interests. Piers Paul Read is a Roman Catholic, so there were no surprises in his recommendation of Clare Asquith's popish apologia, *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare*. M.R.D. Foot is a military historian, which meant an invitation to splash £50 on the two volume diaries of MI5's war-time head. Much the same spirit animated specialist contributors to the *New Statesman*, notably Ziauddin Sardar who grew very excited about the work of Ebrahim Moosa on the 11th century Muslim theologian Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. The latter's ideas "are essential for a critical synthesis of traditional Islamic thought, modernity and post-modernism".

The Times Literary Supplement, on the other hand, is always stiff with high-brow show-offs. This year's winner by several lengths was that reliable old hand Frederic Raphael, who plumped for a new edition of the poems of Catullus by Peter Green ("His translations – cadenced approximation to the original prosody – catch the Catullan tone, jazzily pitched between the schoolboyish and the erudite") and *Rameaux*, by the French *philosophe* Michael Serres (who apparently "reviews languages and myths as 'formatting' cultural and ethical life, whether on a religious or a scientific grid or on a meshed amalgam.") Not to be outdone, Jonathan Meades weighed in with one of his French cook-books, *La Cuisine de la Tupina*, which hundreds of *Evening Standard* readers will doubtless be rushing out to buy, and Roger Scruton with Richard Taruskin's six-volume *History of Western Music*.

The people's choice this last twelvemonth? Among non-fiction the votes stacked up for Alan Bennett's *Untold Stories*, Alexander Masters' *Stuart: A Life Backwards* and James Shapiro's *1599: A Year in the Life of Shakespeare*. Novel of the year? Er... the Ian McEwan.

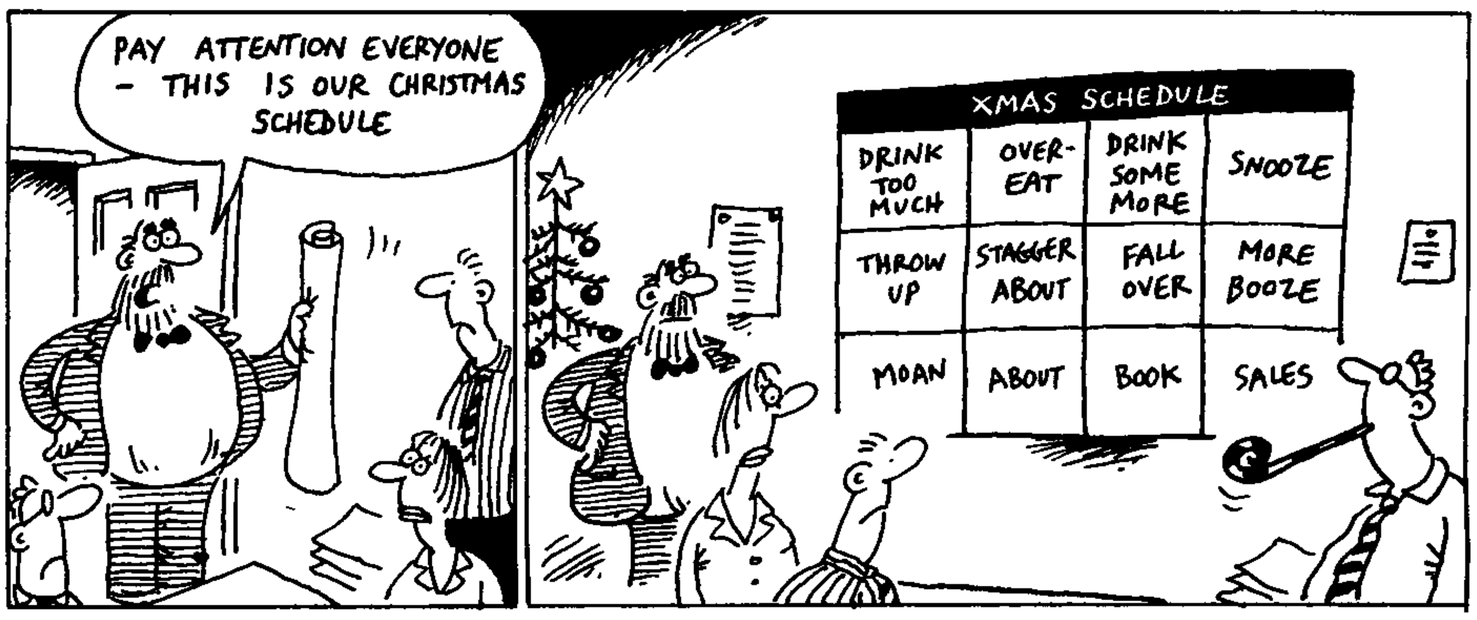
FIRST DRAFTS
Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching grasping, scra –
Oh for God's sake, man, just go home and write it down!
Pearsall.
Charles Dickens

LIBRARY NEWS

■ WATCH out for plum-coloured clouds and big magenta hearts appearing in local public libraries across the country, as the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) rolls out its new graphic-style package, designed to complement the "People's Network" branding.

Nine colours, 28 "picture block" shapes and six shaped blobs make up this graphic system, intended to give booklets and posters "a common look and feel without being heavily branded". In order to show off the package, which cost £15,000, the MLA – the government's national development agency for libraries – has also had a *Little Book of Public Libraries* produced by Red Stone Design Limited at a cost of £12,000. It's a glossy little document, full of upbeat facts about public libraries, accompanied by bright blobs and splats. 10,000 copies were proudly sent to local authority chief execs and other "key influencers".

Meanwhile in Bristol the council has announced that in order to (ahem) balance its books, it will have to cut the libraries budget again – even though the service already fails to meet government standards. In Bridgend, South Wales, the "structural failure" of the reference library book store has added to the £340,000 hole in the libraries' budget. And at Glasgow's council-run Gallery of Modern Art library, late opening nights are being scrapped. Big magenta hearts all round!



Boy wonder

Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt

Anne Rice

(Chatto & Windus, £17.99)

IT'S the greatest story ever told and, according to the publishers, the story Anne Rice was born to write: a first-person account of the childhood of Christ. And jolly topical and timely it is too, published to coincide with that orgy of yuletide commercialism by which we in the west traditionally commemorate the advent of our divine redeemer.

"Give me a boy at seven", the Jesuits used to say (though with the CPS breathing down their necks and canvassing all their old pupils they're probably a bit more circumspect now). Seven is, however, the age at which Rice gives us Jesus himself, in what is partly at least a magical mystery tale.

I use the word "magic" advisedly. Little Jesus makes some little clay sparrows and, lo and behold, they turn into real birds and fly away! He gets into a playground scrap with another boy and – just like that! – the boy lies suddenly dead in the dust. (Afterwards he brings the lad back to life again, so no harm done.) Another time, caught out in the rain, he wishes it would stop: oops, done it again, the clouds suddenly dry up and out comes the sun!

These junior signs and wonders, combined with certain mysterious events surrounding his arrival in the world, the pointing and whispering wherever he goes, inevitably recall a rather more contemporary supernatural prodigy: yes, it's Harry Potter with a halo. There's the same sense of tremulous awe at his precocious gifts and the same nagging curiosity about his true identity. There's even a scene where he wrestles with the Lord of Darkness and resists him, though it could just be a bad dream.

Of course there's more to it than that. It's not just a mystery; it's also a history, and a thoroughly researched one at that. The story begins in Alexandria, where the extended Holy Family are living as refugees after fleeing the brutal regime of King Herod. News of Herod's death, coupled with local resentment at Joseph & co's superior carpentry skills, prompt a return home to Nazareth. They arrive to find a Promised Land mired in civil strife. There are pitched battles in the Temple in Jerusalem. Someone torches Herod's palace. The Pax Romana seems to have broken down, along with the rule of law. Gangs of "freedom fighters" roam the countryside, robbing the native population rather than actually fighting the equally brutish Romans. (The depiction of a nation in the throes of regime change while under foreign occupation will seem oddly contemporary, though it is unclear if that was Anne Rice's intention.)

As if all that were not enough, little Jesus has to contend with an envious step-brother, James, and the refusal of his mum and "dad" to explain what all the whispering and rumours are really all about, why they can never go back to Bethlehem where something unspeakable happened, and why the rabbis treat him so suspiciously. Eventually things settle down, and Jesus is soon the school swot, correcting the Pharisees on their interpretations of scripture and, accidentally, curing an old rabbi's blindness.

Rice, who claims to have returned to the orthodox Catholicism of her youth, has clearly done her historical research and, as she explains in her afterword, she has also obtained the modern equivalent of a *nihil obstat* from the priests she consulted. She does not contradict or cast any doubt upon anything already set down in the Gospels. She has merely embroidered the somewhat sparing account there given with some well documented apocrypha.

The problem is that this respectful adherence to scriptural orthodoxy and historical truth can and does have a stultifying effect. This is meant to be a novel, not a work of devotional meditation. One yearns for the much freer and in many ways more psychologically interesting characterisation of that other Rice, name of Tim, in his libretto for *Jesus Christ Superstar*. *(Really? Ed)*

Anne Rice may be happy enough to let her fancy roam free when recounting the exploits of the blood-sucking undead in swampy New Orleans in novels such as *Interview with the Vampire*. But in this so-called novel she allows herself no scope for her known gifts for fantasy and horror.

Still, the upside of her respectful, uncontroversial approach is, of course, the healthy sales she can expect from all those Christians, populous and vocal as they are, in the plain speaking, freedom loving states of America where, incidentally, Harry Potter has been banned, in some places even burned, as a pagan text.

Books & Bookmen

■ SENSE has prevailed and the sale of Ottakar's to HMV, owner of Waterstone's, has been referred by the Office of Fair Trading to the Competition Commission, which is set to report in May.

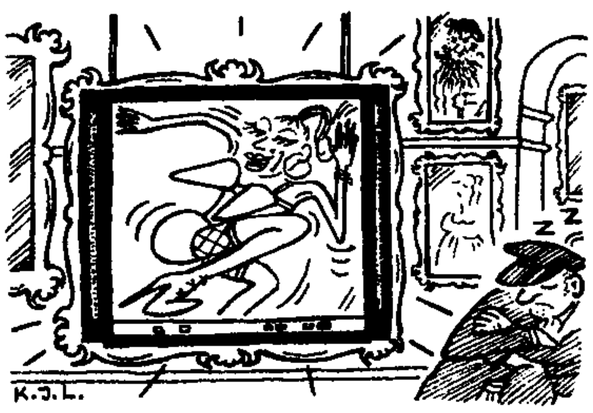
Since the collapse of the Net Book Agreement, any retailer can sell books, and the majority of the book market is in the hands of retailers with limited, heavily discounted ranges. Separately, Waterstone's and Ottakar's have been trying to compete with these retailers; but the presence of both has just about prevented the worst from occurring. Combined, who knows what would happen?

HMV chief executive Alan Giles has assured the press that HMV will still be waiting in May, but HMV might not be alone in its pursuit by that time. Here's hoping…

'Bookworm'

Pseuds Corner

I for one do not dance to dance music: disco for me is a lofty metaphysical mode that induces contemplation…Giorgio Moroder's albums, which I listened to obsessively on headphones, were an enormous inspiration to me throughout the writing of Sexual Personae in the 1970s and 80s. Disco at its best is a neurological event, a shamanistic vehicle of space-time travel…When I wrote in my polemical 1990 New York Times op-ed that "Madonna is the future of feminism," there were squawks of disbelief on all sides – but that



is exactly what came to pass over the next decade. The music videos she produced from the mid-'80s to the early '90s were true objets d'art – in my judgment superior to anything coming from the fine arts in the same period.

CAMILLE PAGLIA
Salon

This time, I saw my future, and it's going to be really good. I feel I've just escaped from a myriad of shit. A ton of crap weighing me down. A deep gel of melancholia. Something spiritually fundamental was trapped. Free, free, free, free.

TRACEY EMIN
Independent

Paris is like a lusty fling you still fancy even after you marry her. And with the current crisp weather and blue skies, she is almost edible.

SIMON DAVIS
Evening Standard

His genius was an aspect of his neuroses. It was Carl Jung who said that his duty as a psychologist was to help men of genius to keep their neuroses. Best's extraordinary skill was as much a reflection of his singular nature as Van Gogh's was of his. And self-destruction was an aspect of both those geniuses. Van Gogh did it quickly; Best's way was slower. But every bit as certain.

At least Van Gogh left paintings. Best leaves only memories and grainy film clips. His was a genius for the ephemeral, for the infinitely trivial. This is not to devalue it. It was beautiful and perfect and it has gone and left us unsatisfied. What more could anybody ask for?

SIMON BARNES
The Times

King Kong connects our origins in the swamp with our ambition to reconquer heaven by building towers of Babel; it is about atavism and aspiration, and, when the monster starts to fancy his screaming female captive, it forces us to rethink the divisions we have made between animal, man and god.

PETER CONRAD
Guardian

On our long, boneshaking bus journeys, with three adults squished into a bench seat originally designed for two American schoolchildren, my solace has been listening to music and audiobooks on my iPod.

I have the tracks on random shuffle, so I have no idea which of the 4,000 songs or chapters will come on, and I'm running a personal contest for the most bizarre combination of audio and visual sensations this throws up. Tied at the top of the charts are a chapter of The History of England concerning the 7th-century arguments between monks from Iona and the followers of Augustine about the shape of their tonsures, which I heard while driving through the mountains of Chiapas; and Groove Armada's Shaking That Ass on an unmade track through Indian villages in Guatemala.

MARY-ANN SIEGHART
The Times

CONTRIBUTORS: 'Suzykat', Don Salter, J. James, David Laffin, Alistair Alexander, AR.

£10 paid for all entries

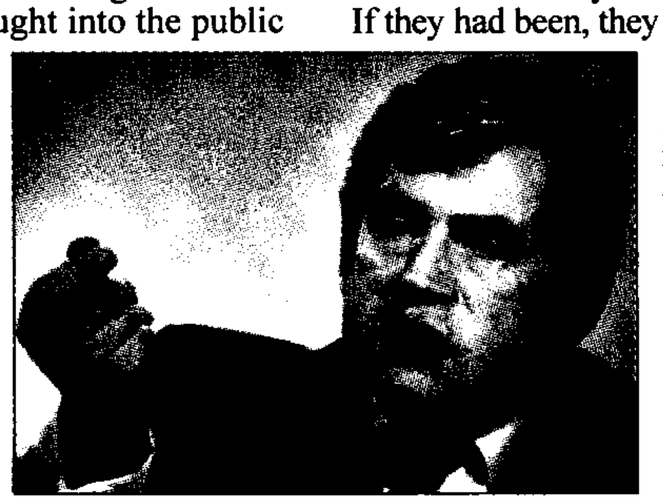
IN THE BACK

BROWN'S BLACK HOLE

GLO worms

IN THE last issue we reported the *Eye's* ongoing (and fruitless) quest to find out how much money is at stake from challenges to UK tax rules under European law, for which no allowance has been made in Gordon Brown's (pictured) plans.

Then, straight after the chancellor's pre-budget report (PBR), HM Revenue and Customs helpfully wrote to say that the potential cost of one of the group litigation orders (GLOs) – under which several of Britain's biggest companies are challenging "franked investment income" (FII) tax rules – had been revealed in the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in Luxembourg a week before. The estimate thus brought into the public domain was of a "maximum tax and interest at stake" of €7bn, or around £5bn.



While last week's papers were full of the government's defeat at the ECJ by Marks & Spencer on terms that limit the financial damage from that case to no more than £100m or so, this colossal potential bill has gone unnoticed.

The wheels of the ECJ grind slowly, however, and it could be up to two years before a decision is reached and the actual cost of the FII GLO is known. But the immediate significance of the amount is illustrated by the precarious balances the chancellor predicted for his current account in the PBR: a £4bn deficit in 2006/07; flat in 2007/08; and a surplus of £7bn in 2008/09. At these levels, the GLO costs could even tip the balance on Brown's first golden rule that current spending doesn't exceed income over the economic cycle. And £5bn is the amount at stake on just one GLO: there are still another four to resolve, whose estimated costs the government won't disclose. So the public can know that the GLOs will probably throw Gordon's sums out (or necessitate corresponding tax rises)… but will simply have to guess by how much!

HMRC insists that, despite the latest disclosure, to reveal the full picture would not be in the public interest. When it comes to the right to know, the British taxpayer ranks some way below the European courts. Companies set to cash in on the FII case include old favourites BP and British American Tobacco.

Off balance

THE argument over whether the private finance initiative (PFI) is simply a ruse to keep government debt figures down has for years been dismissed as a bit academic. With borrowing consistently low, what did it matter if a few billion should really be added on to take account of PFI commitments stretching up to 30 years ahead?

There was never any danger of Gordon's "sustainable investment" golden rule – that public sector net debt (PSND) must stay below 40 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) – being breached. So the favourable government accounting for PFI couldn't explain why Labour's record investment programme has been pushed through the disastrous initiative, could it?

The figures presented by the chancellor in his recent pre-budget report suggest that, yes, it certainly could. If PFI projects had been included in PSND he would be forecasting breaking the rule quite soon.

Tables buried in Brown's documents show that he expects public sector debt to reach 38.2 percent of GDP by 2008/09. But the Treasury has admitted to the *Eye* that this ignores the slug of "on balance sheet" PFI deals that the Office of National Statistics pointed out earlier in the year should have counted as government debt (see *Eye* 1134).

As just over half of the roughly £50bn of PFI deals are on balance sheet (including £16bn for the London Underground PPP), an extra £25bn or so might be added to the borrowing figures when the ONS corrects the error – some time in summer 2006, conveniently after the next (and possibly last) Brown budget. £25bn would take the expected 08/09 PSND to 39.9 percent of GDP.

But even this is likely to be an underestimate. The *Eye* has shown in the past how PFI deals have been fiddled to count as "off balance sheet", often leading to the ridiculous situation where the commitments show on neither the government's nor the private sector's books. The Treasury's own Financial Reporting Advisory Board found that 20 out of 25 hospital deals it looked at had disappeared down this accounting black hole. None, however, has been correctly re-characterised (see *Eye* 1137). If they had been, they would have significantly increased the total of on balance sheet projects, pushing predicted PSND through the 40 percent barrier by 2008/09. It's only by using PFI in the first place and then incorrectly accounting for it that, for the time being, this embarrassing prospect is averted.

Gordon's self-imposed 40 percent rule is of course completely arbitrary – the economy doesn't collapse when it's broken and most countries have higher debts – and he only introduced it in 1997 to convince a sceptical City of his economic credibility. But the PBR figures show that it demanded a method of investment under which liabilities could be hidden – and the answer was the PFI. Health trusts, education authorities and other public bodies stuck with expensive and under-performing PFI deals are now paying the price.

Bach remedy

NO SUCH problems at the Ministry of Defence, where an internal review of £19bn worth of PFI projects has just found that, in the words of procurement minister Lord Drayson, "the private finance initiative is delivering defence projects to budget and to specification. This is good news for the MoD and for the taxpayer".

It is also a remarkable turnaround since February when, launching the review after Treasury criticism of MoD PFI deals, Drayson's predecessor Lord Bach admitted: "We accept that not all our privately financed projects have run smoothly. There is considerable scope for improvement in the process."

Bach promptly set up a new PFI unit in the MoD and appointed Nick Prior on secondment from the privatised PFI promoting body Partnerships UK (and before then with PricewaterhouseCoopers) to run it and lead the review. Prior was naturally pleased to report last week that: "The findings of this review are good news for the MoD and for PFI as a whole. It is clear that the discipline and rigour that private finance brings to public sector procurement plays a critical role in the delivery of these large and complex projects on time, to budget and to specification."

Only a cynic would put the renewed PFI enthusiasm down to the MoD's enormous forthcoming commitments, including the £13bn Airtanker deal, that would add to the chancellor's burgeoning debts if they weren't funded through PFI; while the clean bill of health will also come as a relief to Mr Prior's employer, PUK, and his old colleagues at PwC receive tens of millions of pounds a year for advising on defence PFI deals.

HEALTH PRIVATISATION

It's a scan-dal

AS THE NHS cash crisis worsens, the Royal Cornwall Hospitals Trust has found an "imaginative" way to deal with spending limits: it is trying to increase private business and undercut neighbouring NHS hospitals in an attempt to run one of its idle MRI scanners.

Private Eye has seen an internal memo from the trust's head of imaging, Malcolm Brooker, saying that because of tight funding, the trust could not "open the second MRI scanner" and faced "long waiting times".

The memo suggested the trust would "open the second scanner and focus a significant amount of dedicated time per week on private patients only". It proposes "providing this patient service within core NHS hours". The team specifically set out to take work from the nearby Derriford hospital in Plymouth by offering cheaper private scans. To "drive demand, tariff will be dropped to £250 per basic MR [Scan]".

The ultimate aim of increasing this private work was raising cash so "we can fund additional radiographer hours to support some further limited NHS use of the second scanner to start to address the long wait times".

A spokesperson for Royal Cornwall Hospitals confirmed that the trust was putting the private scans plan into operation, arguing that it was "quite clever to get private patients to pay for NHS patients". However, while the trust may be making the best of a bad job, the fact that a hospital has to do extra private work and deliberately undercut a nearby NHS hospital just to fund the use of existing equipment, indicates the depth of the funding difficulties in the NHS. Even with the extra private money coming in, the memo asks all clinicians at the hospital to limit NHS scanning referrals.

Paddington bare

SOMEONE may yet have to carry the can for the expensive failure of the £1bn Paddington Health Campus super-hospital plan (see *Eyes passim*).

The National Audit Office (NAO) announced that it is to carry out a value-for-money study into whether the plug should have been pulled on the fiasco earlier; and NAO boss Sir John Bourn has promised it will look into "accountabilities and responsibilities".

At Prime Minister's Questions last month, John Randall MP asked why no health minister had been willing to give evidence to the previous independent inquiry into the collapse (the report was damning but had no remit to place blame). The inquiry team had requested an interview with the then Health Minister John Hutton (now Secretary of State for Work and Pensions); but of the 69 people asked to give evidence, he was one of three who refused.

"I do not know why a minister did not attend, and I will write to the hon gentleman and tell him why," pledged the prime minister before blathering: "The real-terms increase in health service spending in his area is more than 6 percent, which means 3,800 more nurses, 500 more consultants and 30 more GPs. That is a very good reason why people in his constituency and elsewhere should vote Labour."

Tony Blair did indeed then write to Mr Randall, explaining that: "The two senior officials, who were the most closely involved with the Paddington Health Campus project, worked with and gave evidence to the SHA's inquiry." No mention was made of ministers who wouldn't answer questions. And Mr Randall's Uxbridge constituents aren't likely to see those 500 extra consultants any time soon either. The local primary care trust forecasts a deficit of £31m in 2005-6 and plans to axe beds at Hillingdon hospital to cope.

MISCARRIAGES OF JUSTICE

Blasted Heath

QUESTION: How many of the world's leading pathologists does it take to overturn a wrongful conviction for murder? Answer: five.

The pathologists were so concerned about evidence given by their Home Office contemporary Michael Heath (see *Eyes passim*: it resulted in a man being jailed for life for the murder of his girlfriend), that some gave their time and service free to present evidence to the court of appeal.

Details of the disquiet in the forensic world about the activities of Michael Heath emerged last month when the Court of Appeal gave its detailed reasons for freeing Steven Puaca, jailed in 2002 for the murder of his girlfriend, Jacqueline Tindsley.

At Puaca's original trial Heath had said that Ms Tindsley had been smothered and pushed face down on her bed. But two defence pathologists disagreed with him; and five more pathologists testified at Puaca's appeal that there was no evidence to support Heath's conclusion.

Ms Tindsley, who had a long history of drug and alcohol abuse, in fact died of a drugs overdose, perhaps coupled with a seizure, as Puaca, who found her and raised the alarm, had claimed. She had a cocktail of substances in her blood including opiates, tranquillisers, anti-depressants and alcohol.

The Puaca case was one of two involving Heath which triggered a rare Home Office disciplinary tribunal into the pathologist's work. It was his fellow pathologists who made the complaints against him. But in the light of the appeal court ruling, pressure is mounting on the tribunal – due to sit next June – to cast the net wider to look at other controversial cases, such as that of Simon Hall (*Eyes passim*) jailed for the murder of elderly Suffolk neighbour Joan Albert.

The three appeal judges criticised Heath for apparently forgetting his role as an "objective expert". It was, they said, "wholly wrong" of him to carry out a post-mortem examination for the police or coroner, but then leave it to the defence to carry out a post mortem to set out the contrary arguments.

In the other case being examined by the Home Office inquiry, Kenneth Fraser was arrested and charged with murder after Heath concluded that his girlfriend had been hit over the head with a wooden plank. Fraser was freed after no fewer than four other pathologists detailed how she had fallen downstairs.

The *Eye* has learnt that there have long been concerns about the work of Michael Heath, who has been involved in some of the country's most high profile cases, including the murders of Lin and Megan Russell.

In March 1996, Craig Kerwin, a petty Kent burglar, was nearly jailed for killing 73-year-old Jocelyn Strutt as a result of Heath's evidence. She died at her home in Southborough, and suffered chronic artery disease and high blood pressure and had brittle bones, caused by osteoporosis.

Kerwin had burgled her home, some two days *after* she died and noticed a very bad smell but had not seen a body. It was found under a stepladder, from which she may have fallen. But Michael Heath, instructed by Kent Police, suggested she had chest injuries "consistent with having been caused by a blow by a heavy blunt object" and that the injury coupled with "excitement had cause the heart muscle to rupture".

Two other pathologists thought Heath's conclusions "unacceptable", and "quite implausible" with "no pathological evidence" whatsoever. When the case came to trial, in May 1997, the judge decided that there was no evidence fit to put before a jury to support the case of manslaughter and the jury was ordered to acquit.

A year later, at the inquest into the death of Gambian asylum-seeker Ibrahim Sey, 29, Heath's competence was again called into question. Mr Sey had died after being sprayed in the face with CS gas after he had been handcuffed and restrained on the floor. Dr Heath and one consultant psychiatrist had suggested that Mr Sey had suffered some kind of sudden death as a result of the mental illness he suffered. Earlier Heath had been forced to withdraw another conclusion that Mr Sey had suffered hypertensive heart disease when he admitted there was no pathological basis for the diagnosis. Again five other experts suggested that restraint could not be ruled out as factor. The jury returned a verdict of unlawful killing.

Patrick O'Connor, the QC for the Sey family repeatedly questioned Heath's competence and expertise. Heath had been a forensic pathologist since 1977, yet he was not admitted to the Royal College of Forensic pathologist until 1989. The reason for the delay despite years of experience? He had repeatedly failed his exams.

PRIVATISING AFRICA

A bit rich?

BRITISH multinational Biwater has announced that it is suing Tanzania, one of the world's poorest countries, after the firm was kicked off a water privatisation contract covering Dar es Salaam.

The Biwater statement claims the Tanzanian government "acted disgracefully" towards Biwater staff and was issued on 1 December. However, Biwater admits that it actually took the case to court on 2 August. So why did Biwater decide to use a PR firm, Citigate, to issue a lengthy justification four months after it had begun legal action? Probably because campaigners for the World Development Movement had recently spotted a listing for the legal case on the relatively obscure website of the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes and issued its own press release denouncing the move.

As *Eye* readers know (see issue 1135), the Tanzanian government says Biwater simply failed to put its promised investment into the water works or improve supply in Dar Es Salaam, while Biwater claims the "project failed because of a lack of political will" on the part of the Tanzanians.

There was, however, considerable political will in Britain behind Biwater. The Department for International Development funded a PR campaign to persuade Tanzanians that privatisation was a good idea. This included giving cash to Adam Smith International consultants to fund a pro-privatisation pop song. The Export Credit Guarantee Department also underwrote Biwater's Tanzania scheme, so the British taxpayer may help refund the firm for its losses. *Private Eye* asked the DfID if it had any opinion about a British firm taking the 164th poorest country in the world (out of 177) to court, but the department declined to respond.

CHARITY NEWS

Home service

DISABILITY charity Scope's new role as a campaigning and lobbying-focused organisation has led to a series of posters calling for better transport access. The charity accuses airlines, train and bus companies of disablism, saying it is "Time to Get Equal".

But perhaps Scope should put its own house in order first following the damning verdict of Ofsted inspectors who visited Beaumont College, a residential college for 16 to 25 year olds with cerebral palsy and related disabilities, run by Scope. The college fails to comply with the 2001 Special Educational Needs Disability Act, say the inspectors. "Classrooms are often too small for the numbers of learners and staff, with significant noise intrusion and interruptions." While they did praise some outstanding elements of the teaching, inspectors found that residential accommodation for students doesn't even meet the standards required by the Commission for Social Care Inspectorate, and nor does it comply with race relations law. So much for "Time to Get Equal".

In its full-page advert in the *Times Educational Supplement* in October (*Eye* 1145), Scope chief Tony Manwaring insisted that despite Scope's ideological commitment to fully inclusive education (which would eventually make places like Beaumont redundant): "We will provide continuing care and education of the highest standard. Yes, we are deeply committed to changing the shape of those services over time: but in a way that is managed; respects the principles to which we are committed; and takes everyone with us every step of the way."

Leadership and management by the charity scored an "inadequate" grade 4 from Ofsted, with the comments that Scope had been "very slow" to deal with significant weakness raised at a previous inspection. "Uncertainty about whether or not the charity would continue to fund the college has made strategic planning very difficult,".

OLD PEOPLE'S HOMES

Lawyers who care

THREATENING lawyers' letters aimed at stifling criticism and concern about care (or the lack of it) in old people's homes are not confined to Bupa, it seems.

The *Eye* recently reported how City lawyers acting for Bupa threatened legal action for harassment against Dee Sedgewick, who wanted an explanation and apology over the care her mother Joan Gaddes received in a Suffolk old people's home.

Mrs Gaddes died in hospital in September 2002, just over a month after being admitted to hospital suffering weight loss, dehydration and pressure sores – none of which was diagnosed until the day of admission. After Mrs Sedgewick had a letter about her mother's plight published in the *Daily Mail*, Bupa's legal director wrote to her to warn her against making "seriously defamatory" comments.

The *Eye* has now learned that Westminster Health Care, once run by Labour's favourite health guru, Chai Patel, also threatened to sue for libel over the damning independent inspection report into Lynde House (pictured), Twickenham, the home at the centre of long-running allegations of neglect and suffering (see *Eyes passim*).

The report, by Mary McLaren, catalogued a series of failures, including a high level of falls and unexplained bruising among frail residents; delay in getting medical treatment; poor prevention and treatment of bed sores; emergency call bells being out of reach or going unanswered; failure to regularly change incontinence pads; etc.

The report was delayed while Westminster Health Care sought to water down the criticisms. When it failed, lawyers acting for the company threatened to sue both the South West London Health Authority and Mary McLaren personally if they went ahead and published for "damages for libel and negligent mis-statement".

Fortunately for the residents' families who had fought so hard for an investigation into the home, the health authority did not bow to pressure. Unfortunately for the families, however, lawyers acting for Dr Patel at the recent GMC hearing into his role in the Lynde House affair, ruled that the McLaren report – the main evidence against him – was inadmissible.

MIDDLE EAST

No surprise there, then

FOREIGN Secretary Jack Straw was "deeply shocked" when US troops discovered 170 prisoners, apparently abused and tortured, in a secret Interior Ministry prison in Baghdad. Defence Secretary John Reid has become so worried about "infiltration" of the Iraqi security forces by religious militia he has sent the former chief of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, top cop Ronnie Flanagan, to Basra to investigate. And ministers say they are troubled by the violence of religious militias across Iraq. But should any of them be surprised?

According to Foreign Office documents given to *Private Eye* under the Freedom of Information Act, officials warned ministers, both before and after the war, about the strongest Shiite militia, the Badr Brigade, and its history of "brutal murder" and the dangers posed by its "integration" into Iraq's security forces.

In late 2004, with the insurgency showing no sign of weakening, the US decided that the brigade *should* be integrated into Iraq's security forces. The election earlier this year of the United Iraq Alliance, which rested heavily on the political wing of the Badr brigade, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), merely increased this integration. Bayan Jabar, the Interior Minister ultimately in charge of the secret jails, is a leading figure in SCIRI, as is the Iraqi vice-president, Adel Abdel Mahdi.

UK Foreign Office briefings to ministers make clear that SCIRI fought a hard but also bloodthirsty fight against Saddam when he was in power; and, it seems, it has lost none of its faith in "brutal" methods. According to the FO, SCIRI and the Badr Brigade also "played a major role in the uprising of March 1991 after the Gulf Conflict, though its brutal murder of low-ranking members of the Ba'th party and army may have played into Saddam's hands and exacerbated Sunni mistrust of possible Shi'a rule." The same memo shows that FO officials worried that "it remains to be seen whether attempts to disband the Badr corps as a militia and integrate them into the new Iraqi army and security services will succeed."

The FO also warned ministers that SCIRI and the Badr Brigade owed a great deal of loyalty to Iran. A 2001 briefing said that before the war SCIRI was "based in Tehran and receives Iranian patronage". It added that the Badr Brigade was "largely made up of Iraqi prisoners of war taken by the Iranians during the Iran-Iraq war".

The briefings make clear that the UK government hoped the election in January 2005 would be won by Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord with its policy of "moderate Ba'thism without Saddam's excesses". No doubt it now hopes Allawi will do well in this month's elections, thereby reducing the influence of SCIRI and the Badr Brigade. If Iraqi voters disappoint the British, however, the government will have to accept that the Badr militia and its methods are here to stay.

"NOW do you believe in democracy?"

Arrested development

UNDER pressure from Israel, the British government looks set to rewrite legislation on international offences such as torture and war crimes which in the past has enabled the UK to bring Nazis and Afghan warlords to justice.

Last month a delegation from Israel's foreign and law ministries met their counterparts in the UK. The meeting, according to British ministers, "was confidential". But not so in Israel, where the media reported that the delegation was assured that Britain is poised to change the law to ensure that no Israeli military or government personnel would ever be arrested for war crimes should they venture on to UK soil.

This move follows events last summer, when lawyers acting for innocent civilian Palestinians caught up in so-called "targeted killings" and mass house demolitions in the then-occupied Gaza Strip, obtained an unprecedented arrest warrant for war crimes against Major General Doron Almog, former commander of the occupying forces.

Under the Geneva Convention, the UK has universal jurisdiction to arrest and try those from an occupying force who are accused of war crimes if they are perceived to operate within a culture of impunity in their own country. With fewer than 5 percent of civilian deaths caused by military action being investigated by Israeli authorities, Palestinian human rights groups had sought Almog's arrest in the UK.

Although a series of allegations were made about several killings, the senior magistrate at London's Bow Street only granted the warrant in respect of the demolition of 59 houses in the Rafah refugee camp in 2002. When Almog flew into Heathrow airport on 11 September, Scotland Yard officers were waiting to arrest him. Allegedly tipped off by police sources, the Israeli embassy told Almog to stay on the plane and return to Israel. Ariel Sharon was said to be furious about the attempted arrest and it seems a major diplomatic row was only averted when the British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw apologised.

At the time Almog was in command in Gaza, Straw was scathing about deaths there. He described the killing of 15 civilians, including nine children, in one "targeted" attack – where a one-tonne bomb was dropped on Gaza City – as "unjustified and disproportionate". After the killing of a pregnant mother in her home, he urged Israel to act within international law. Straw has also described the policy of mass home demolitions in Rafah as amounting to collective punishment – the very same cases in which Almog was alleged to have been implicated. But no one seems prepared to take Israeli diplomats to task for apparently perverting the course of justice by assisting Almog to avoid arrest.

Word has it that, under extra pressure from the US (which feared that its military might also be subject to an arrest warrant in the UK if its members stopped off on their way back from Iraq), the government is now preparing to change the law so that such a warrant could only be applied for by the attorney-general, as an executive political rather than judicial decision.

In the City

THE phoney pharaoh Mohamed Fayed – faced by minimal growth at Harrods, his Knightsbridge ATM – has increased bank borrowings and arranged a new loan facility to help finance his less than booming business empire.

Fayed has increased the Harrods group's original £350m facility with Royal Bank of Scotland by £40m, while Bocardo SA, the Liechtenstein company that owns his Scottish estates, including Balnagown Castle, has agreed a new facility with the aid of Bradford & Bingley.

Fayed meanwhile continues to extract large, unearned dividends from the parent group Harrods Holdings: £39m last year, up from £27m, paid offshore to a Bermuda family-owned partnership.

The Harrods group pension fund, however, is looking less healthy. The latest triennial valuation revealed a shortfall between assets and future pension liabilities of £95m. In 2002 it was only £14m. The market value of the fund's assets covered only 67 percent of its projected accrued benefits.

The Harrods accounts to January 2005 were filed on 30 November, right on the Companies Act deadline. The main company accounts – for Harrods itself and its parent Holdings – were signed off just two days earlier by auditor Grant Thornton. However, some of the smaller subsidiaries had finalized their accounts way back in April. The 2004 accounts – which showed a much better profit performance – were published in June that year.

Still, the Fayed PR machine promptly disclosed that Harrods had survived the poor trading hitting lesser high street retailers. "Luxury brands cushion Harrods" trumpeted the *Financial Times* (1 December), reporting the dividend payment and profits up 20 percent and sales of £492m.

The actual accounts, made available almost two weeks later, tell a less impressive story. To begin with the £492m figure was the "gross transaction value" which includes sales by concessionaires. These can no longer be counted as turnover, which in fact was up a mere 4.5 percent at £344m.

Profits before tax were indeed up £4m at £23.9m and have risen from £7m in the past three years. But a higher tax charge meant that the net figure was actually £1.2m down at £14.1m.

The higher tax bill of £9.8m may bear the imprint of some closer attention by the taxman. Some £800,000 is an under-provision for earlier years and £700,000 is explained as "expenses not deductible for tax purposes". There were no similar items in the previous year. From his Swiss tax exile Fayed is still fighting attempts by the taxman to make him pay more personal tax in the Scottish courts.

Harrods paid up to its immediate parent company Harrods (UK) a dividend of £39m mainly from reserves. Harrods (UK) in turn passed that on to Holdings, plus a further £12m. But that still left Holdings with a net profit of just under £8m from which to generate its £39m dividend to the Fayed partnership.

Coincidentally, the amount of new bank borrowing raised during the year was £39.5m. The banks were £370m at end January. Since then £9.5m has been knocked off as a result of a property sale. The RBS loan is due to be repaid by 2020 – by when the pharaoh will be 91.

The Bocardo loan facility was arranged in March 2005. The amount of the facility is unknown. It is guaranteed by two other Fayed Liechtenstein vehicles: Prestige Properties (which owns 55 Park Lane, the residential block next to the Dorchester) and its parent, Tane Fount.

These "loan facilities" to Bocardo appear to

You can contact the In the Back team on 020 7437 4017

be a continuation or extension of the around £50m made available by Bradford & Bingley to Prestige in 2003. By no doubt happy coincidence the B&B finance director Rosemary Thorne used to work for Fayed. Doubtless this did not ensure any special advantage.

Fayed's ability to borrow has been improved by the continued growth in property values. In September the Harrods freehold properties were revalued at £690m – a £130m increase on the balance sheet figure.

The increased borrowings come at a time when Fayed has also been selling assets. In addition to the £13.5m from the property sold in April, the shoe chain Kurt Geiger was sold for £46m in July.

Harrods may not yet have replaced its fourth chief executive in five years, but it has recruited the expertise of former Kingfisher boss Sir Geoff Mulcahy who quietly joined the board of Harrods (UK) in June.

Like many old established companies with a large army of longer-living present and future pensioners, the pension deficit timebomb created by falling interest rates and share prices still below 2000 peaks looms large for Harrods. At January the present value of group pension liabilities was put at £288m with the deficit estimated at £69m after tax. Three months later the triennial valuation showed that assets covered just two-thirds of the liabilities, despite a slight reduction in the gross deficit to a mere £95m. To deal with the problem Harrods has agreed to increase its contributions by 1 percent of salaries and pump in a further £1.2m – hardly filling the yawning gap and somewhat less than Fayed extracted for himself and his family.

Fulham is another drain on the Harrods finances. Harrods (UK) charged the Premiership club almost £33m for payroll and administration services during the year. At the year-end it was still owed £16m.

With continued losses at Fulham and the Paris Ritz hotel, and no meaningful growth at Harrods, it is no wonder that the pharaoh and his bankers are so close and getting closer.

ACCOUNTANT Stuart Pearson may certainly be hot favorite for a new Gnome award as Mug of the Year after buying into Crown Corporation and its non-existent £365m Brazilian bank deposit. But before the con was exposed – by Pearson trying to move the Monopoly money out of Brazil – he and his friends were busy climbing aboard the illusory gravy train.

Firstly Pearson arrived at Crown as chief executive in June after the company acquired his Langbar Capital company for £700,000 in 2m Crown shares valued at a below-market 35p each. This seems a good price for a largely consultancy business that was essentially injected into Langbar Capital for just £120,000 six months before and which had net assets of just £54,000 in March 2005 and owed £80,000 to Pearson and his wife. Especially as the shares were supposedly backed by assets worth 240p – assuming the Brazilian cash to be real, as Pearson did.

No sooner was he installed and Crown renamed Langbar International than Pearson began a series of deals involving himself or his long-time Yorkshire business associate Philip Wood, who joined the Langbar board seven days after Pearson.

"I have known Philip for a number of years," declared Pearson. Indeed he had. In 1996 and 1997 Pearson and Wood had been directors of the Peter Wood Group and Blades Italia, a company linked to Wood's involvement in Sheffield United soccer club. In January 2004 Wood had joined the board of Langbar Capital (USA). Pearson became a director in March 2005. In November 2004 Pearson became a director of the AIM-listed MOS International, since renamed Global Marine Energy, where Wood was chairman. Pearson resigned in July 2005. One of the first deals Pearson and Wood decided to effect at Langbar international was a joint venture with MOS/ Global which has been a less than stellar success, despite issuing billions of shares now worth fractions of a penny.

Pearson was also a chairman of and shareholder in another Yorkshire AIM-listed stock, marketing company Real Affinity, which was doing badly. Pearson had joined in 2004. So what could be more natural therefore then that Langbar should announce in September that it was to make an agreed bid for Real Affinity in Langbar shares valued at 78p each? This deal fell through when the Brazilian bomb went off last month.

Unkind critics might observe that the two Yorkshiremen were out of their depth when it came to dealing with those behind the Crown scam and perhaps wanted too much to believe what they were told by the boys from Brazil about the £365m.

FOLLOWERS of the Fundamentally Supine Authority, especially the 40,000 victims of the split capital trusts scandal who must now wait until next year for news of any compensation, will not be amused to discover how well the FSA celebrated the last festive season.

An *Eye* reader passes on the results of how the FSA partied after caving in to the split capital promoters a year ago. A Freedom of Information Act request elicited the information that the FSA spent £182,062 on staff entertaining during the year to June 2005, including £103,890 over the previous Christmas and New Year period. What all-mouth-no-bite chief executive John Tiner and his supposed guardians of the public had to celebrate other than keeping their jobs, is a mystery.

IN JUNE 2001 Independent Insurance collapsed with a huge hole in its balance sheet and the SFO began an investigation. In December 2005 founder Michael Bright and two other directors were charged with conspiracy to defraud.

In May 2002 investigations began on both sides of the Atlantic into an alleged £400m fraud on several banks involving purported metal trades in London and New York by RBG Resources and Allied Deals. In May 2004 five defendants in the New York case were convicted and have since been jailed. In October 2005 three defendants were charged by the Serious Farce Office with conspiracy to defraud.

Discuss.

'Slicker'

MOVING ON...!

CONGRATULATIONS to Robert Peston, who is leaving the *Sunday Telegraph* to replace Jeff Randal as the BBC's business editor.

Peston's three-year stint at Canary Wharf was distinguished by his refusal to so much as mention the travails of his then boss Conrad Black, on the grounds that "it didn't seem proper to instruct my team to do some sleuthing on him. It would have been tantamount to encouraging them to break their contracts" – reporting the accusations of criminal conduct against their proprietor counting, in Peston's view, as "bringing the company into disrepute".

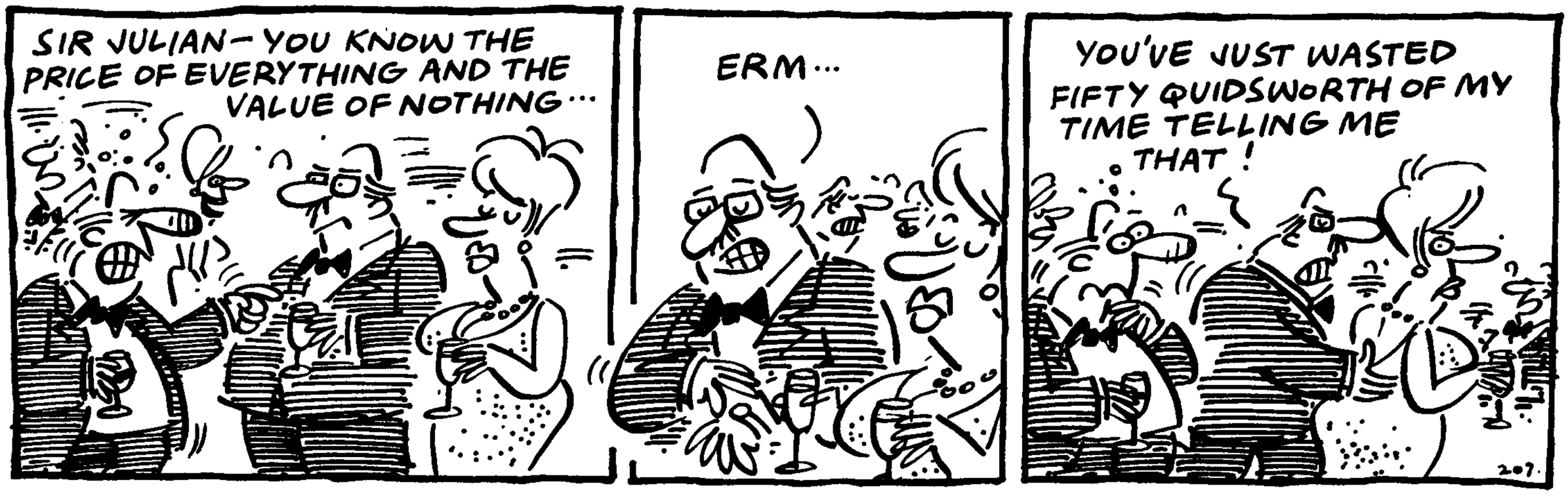
Reviewing his own conduct following Black's departure last September, even Peston was forced to admit it was "pathetic" – an endorsement which was no doubt given the prominence it deserved on the CV he dispatched to Television Centre.

Still, with awkward questions still being asked about the £16.2m the BBC spent to extract itself from an outsourcing deal with Land Securities Trillium which had 26 years left to run, the £7m-and-counting overspend on the redevelopment of Broadcasting House and the sale last summer of the corporation's entire broadcast wing to a venture capitalist with no experience in the media, perhaps Peston is just the sort of chap the corporation needs.

Does Peston's appointment mean that BBC viewers will now be in for a steady diet of wit and wisdom from heavyweight stockbroker Terry Smith? Probably. Smith was ever present, and usually in flattering tones, in the pages of the *Sunday Telegraph* while Peston was in residence. Sadly neither Peston nor his paper rarely felt the need to inform readers that Peston was still a shareholder in Collins Stewart Tullett where Smith was chief executive.

As Peston himself finally wrote on 29 May last: "I have 3,000 odd shares [actually 3,164], a hangover from when I worked with him and I won't be thought neutral." Doubtless the BBC will be insisting on these shares being sold if they have not been already to ensure that neutrality.

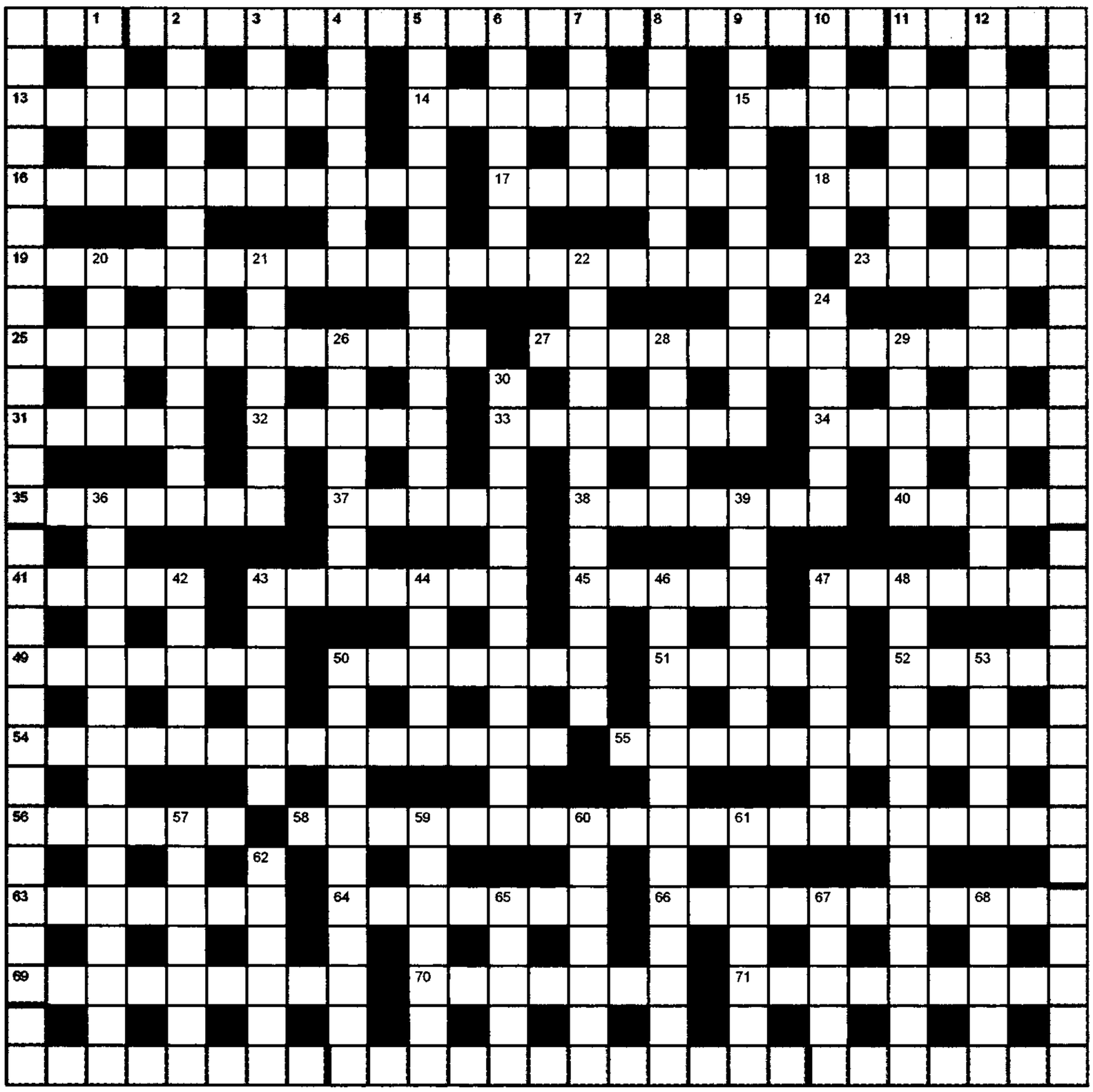
THE DIRECTORS — DREDGE & RIGG


SIR JULIAN – YOU KNOW THE PRICE OF EVERYTHING AND THE VALUE OF NOTHING…
ERM…
YOU'VE JUST WASTED FIFTY QUIDSWORTH OF MY TIME TELLING ME THAT!
207

EYE CROSSWORD 303

by Cyclops

£250 PRIZE



Running clockwise around the perimeter of the grid are the names of eight well-known people and one company featured in Pseuds' Corner during 2005. A thick line separates each one. The names are made up of the following letters: AAAAAAAAAA BBB CC DD EEEEEEEEEEEE GGGG HH IIIIII JJ LLLLLLLLLL MMM NNNN OOOOOOO PP RRRRRRRRRR SSSSSSSS TTTTTTTT UU W YYYYY

ACROSS

13 Unimpressive members but they offer a succession of bangs (5,4)
14 Possible result of Railtrack failure – not the German complaint? (7)
15 Closely connected with pissed knight – wanker (5-4)
16 Rejected porn distributed right away as a big West Country attraction (4,7)
17 Wearing Clinton's underpants? Almost (not to go on about it) (2,5)
18 Leader of Conservatives brought to ruin – that is something of little cost (7)
19 Coward hit single mom and she dang set about opening of dick (3,4,3,10)
23 Young bird in financial quarter abandoning sex bastard without name (6)
25 Badly thought-of Dicky got pregnant (3-9)
27 Not forced to have an orgasm, not demanding to try – quite carefree (4,4,4,2)
31 What IDS did in May, holding "nothing is immoral" (5)
32 Spade to Derek is a racist nickname (5)
33 Agreements reached when electrical flow applied to trousers! (7)
34 Backing up when gobbled by good bloke (7)
35 Is there something wrong with shaking tush, pa? (5,2)
37 Girl in IRA smashed bones (5)
38 No nice bloke gets off hugging a celebrity (7)
40 Hooligan goes topless, showing boner (5)
41 God! Cyclops and Conservatives' leader's jumping ship! (5)
43 Chamber set fire to institute (Catholic), being prudent (7)
45 Yarn – sort of thing you expect from Archer about squeezing ladies' tops (5)
47 Bill with Gore stifling key American impeachment (7)
49 They might well take junket in eastern America? (4,3)
50 Man, wearing support for balls back to front, shouldered by US officer (7)
51 One politician, one excuse (5)
52 Like a member's full of himself? (5)
54 Not what you expect from politician Frank, delivered to FBI agent (4-10)
55 Underground types shag partners stupid (5-7)
56 Organ excited with top grade butter (6)
58 Lose both possibilities of a trip, being constrained by a pair of shits? (4,7,3,6)
63 *Sun* clit shot goes down well with certain sick types (7)
64 Old TV series that's extremely dirty and obnoxious (7)
66 Out-spin PM – or resort to taking one's chances (11)
69 National augmented model by the editor (9)
70 Outside work measure IRA kiboshed (4-3)
71 One slipped out of dishevelled hair-net and wig in which one was bedded? (9)

DOWN

1 Mark needs help, it's reported, after gun running initially (5)
2 Means of getting shot of a stand-offish celebrity? (9,4)
3 Sailors in shit blue material (5)
4 Brian's pee isn't recycled (7)
5 Was the fastest ever catheter (or otherwise) in bed? (4,3,6)
6 Heart of New Labour initially involved in lying, spinning and crying (7)
7 What's the betting Steven Spielberg's full of it? (5)
8 Hot action screwing comes first with this old city (7)
9 Visit Wimbledon or Walthamstow, say? Decline! (2,2,3,4)
10 What's left after member gets head from Alice at city's limits? (6)
11 Nervous Jack wants sex – Tony's extremely protective of Brenda (7)
12 Figure girl going to country dance was game once (9,6)
20 Cover up over party substitute member (5)
21 Weak drink – pukes (5,2)
22 Edginess of Blair: City is worried about independence (12)
24 Exploited again by *Private Eye* in a rush (6)
26 Bad, bad Liam's snorting to a greater extent (not E) (7)
28 Terrible conflict seen as publicity-grabbing "positive response" (5)
29 "Piss around by proxy" enterprise of the Beatles (5)
30 Al, semi-erect, jiggled Eve's top – she was abandoned (5,7)
36 Bobby Kennedy was once a Tory teenager involved with New Left (8-7)
39 Land a male on top of Heath (7)
42 Woody type of girl from New York on speed (5)
43 Teletubby to confess to "Moss activity" (6)
44 Start of Tony's downfall – and entourage (5)
46 Endure the trial of having your chest and seat operated on (4,3,6)
47 The sound of an involuntary ejaculation can be – is – a hoot (7)
48 Something taken from the palm when clown touches bollock on goat (7,6)
50 Adam's mate, almost lustful takes one on occasionally (4,3,4)
53 Some swear by one that's looking bloody firm externally (5)
57 Bloke given erection being restrained by strap is to receive more 'instruction'! (7)
59 Poor Neil, openly gay, taken regularly during rugby game (4-3)
60 Buttonholes style shags (7)
61 Tony's no.1 needs a member to exploit (3,4)
62 Coy arse lives over one in Italian town (6)
65 Streak of sadomasochism over organ (5)
67 Game woman grips good (5)
68 Lie spread by Archer at first about and to do with the small intestine (5)

£250 prize to first solution opened on 30.12.05. Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN. Or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk

Solution to Crossword No. 302

Winner: JANET FRASER

ACROSS: 1 Stuccoed 6/23 Square bashing 10 Eagle 11 Babe 12 Wine vat 14 Grocer 18 Escapade 20 Dugout 21/9 Sucked up to 25 Ammo 26 Clout 27/28/13 Lead in one's pencil 29 Nepotism.
DOWN: 2 Tapeworms 4/16A One over the eight 5 Digit 6 Steeple 7 Unbending 8 Rabbi 15 Crackdown 16/3 The Crown 17 Hourglass 19 Addicts 20 Desktop 22 Unman 23 Brown 24 Inlet.

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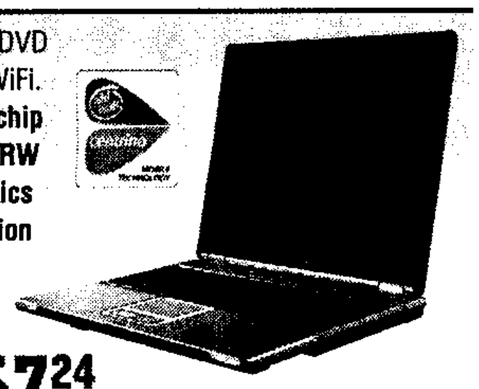

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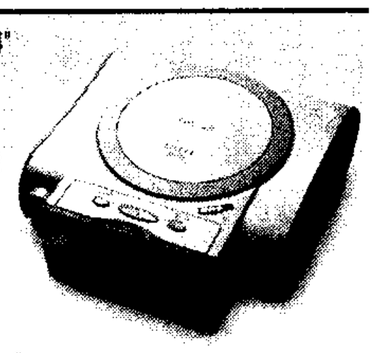

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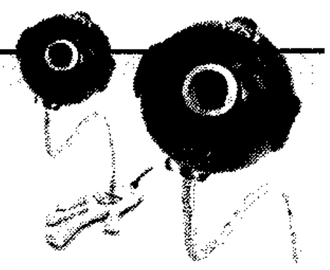

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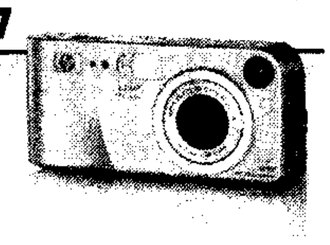

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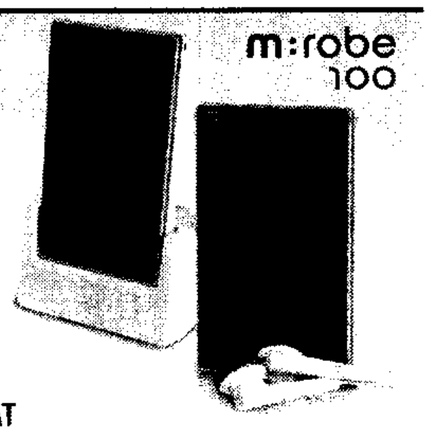

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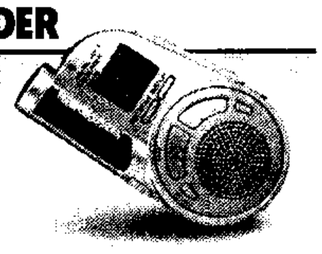

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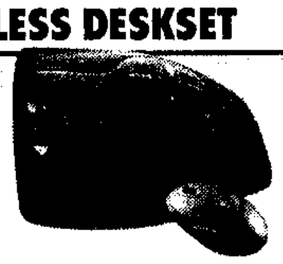

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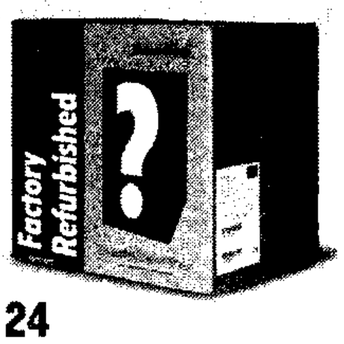

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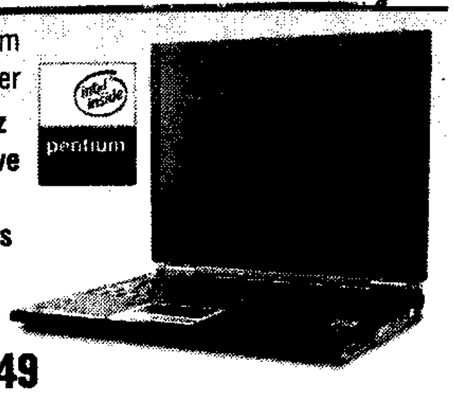
BRAND NAME EMBARGO



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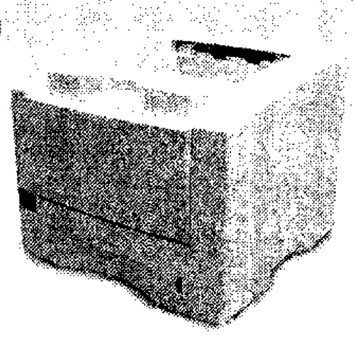

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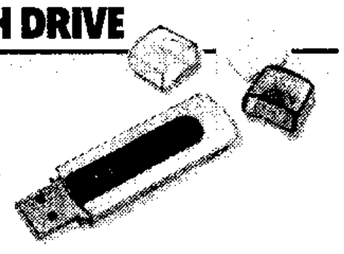

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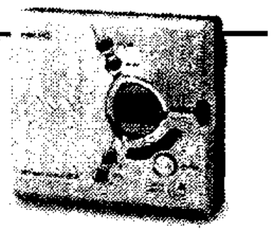

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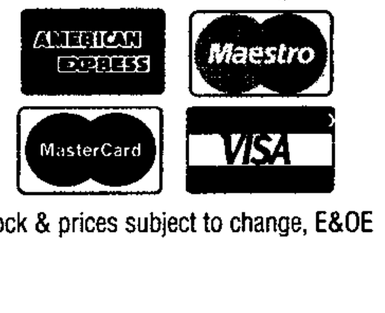

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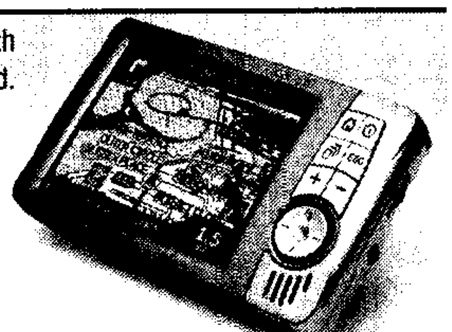

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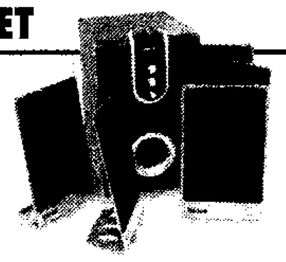

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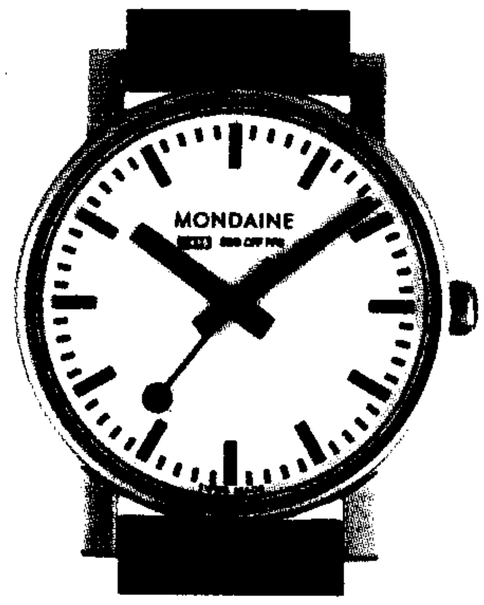

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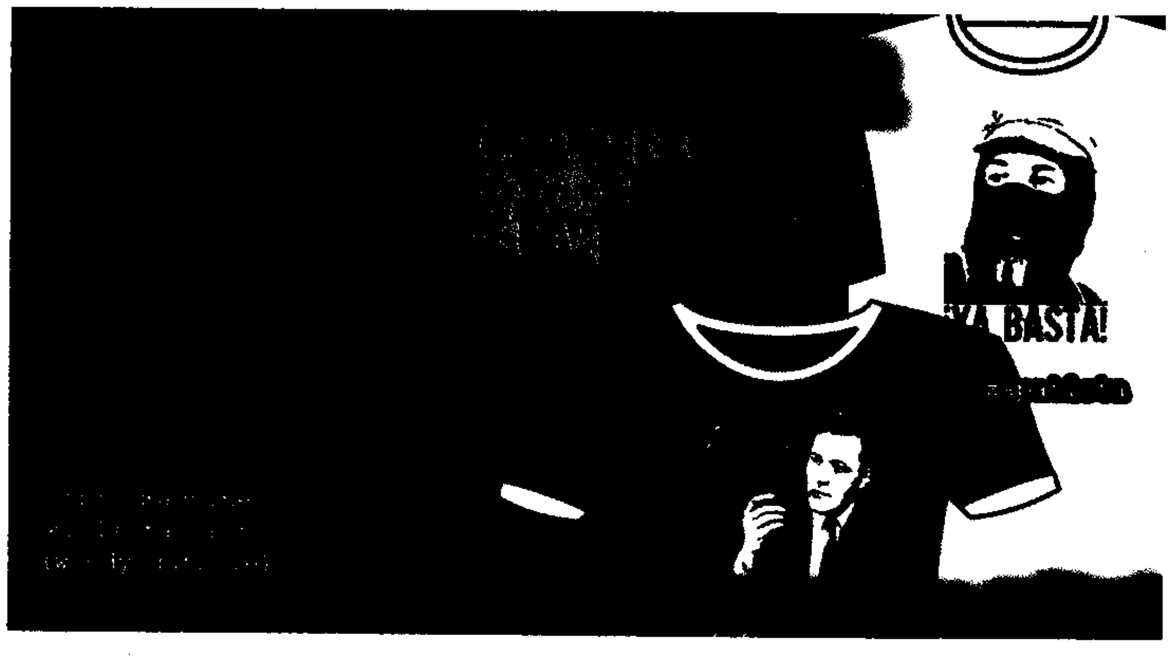

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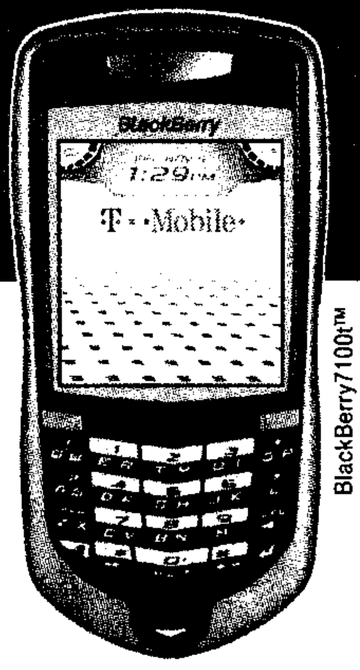

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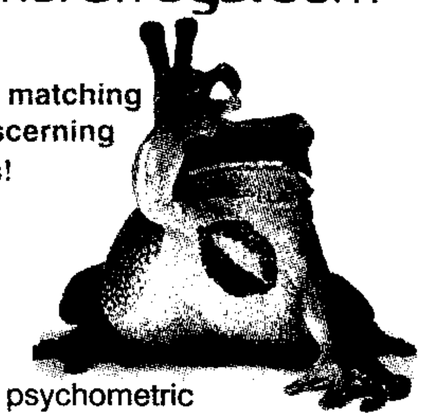

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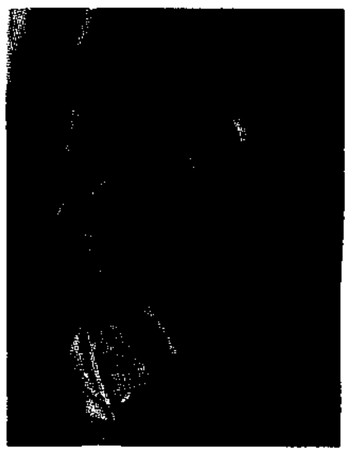

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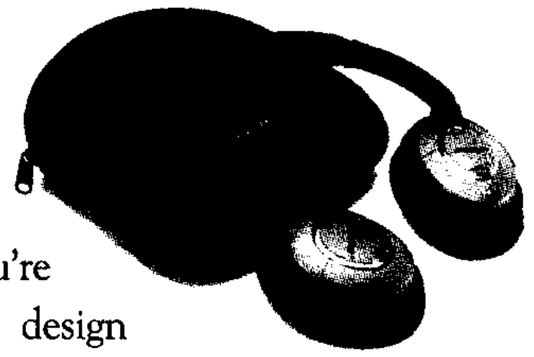

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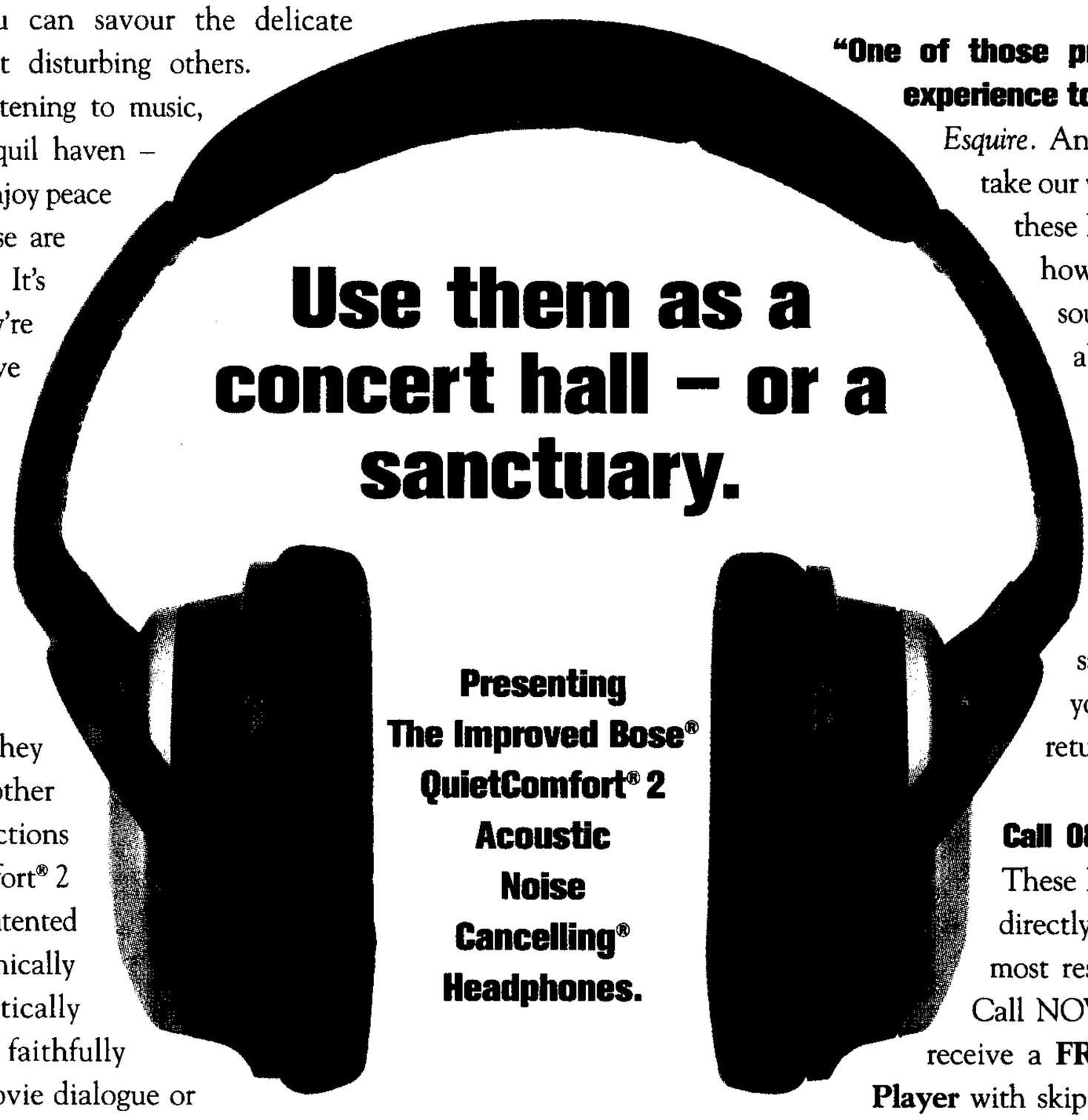

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